

Consulting Psychology as Creative Problem Solving *Lessons From My First 3 Decades*

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The behavioral sciences offer time-tested principles that can help consulting psychologists and their clients design and implement effective change strategies, using a creative problem-solving approach. Over the past 30 years, the author has learned some lessons about how to do this: (a) Never throw anything away—anything observed may help the work of change; (b) problem solving starts with people connecting, to mobilize the resources needed for change; (c) what's learned from consulting with for-profit organizations can be applied to nonprofit organizations with surprisingly little translation; (d) creative problem-solving often begins by building bridges between psychology and other parts of the world; (e) the work of change in the nonprofit world involves looking for leverage opportunities; and (f) the work of change is enhanced by using personal experience in defining change strategies.

Consulting psychology for me is mostly about helping nonprofit organizations wrestle with the challenges of change, whether coming from an internal commitment to planned change or from the need to respond to an unpredictable environment. And it is specifically about *creative problem-solving*, a term borrowed from the work of Sidney Parnes at State University of New York at Buffalo and in turn from the great psychologists J. P. Guilford and Donald MacKinnon, among others. I use the term as a way of thinking about creativity in practical terms, like Kurt Lewin thought about theory, and to encapsulate something key to the consulting psychologist's role in the world. It also refers to the other great love of my professional life—the psychology of creativity, including work I've done with artists over a long time, but that's a subject for another conversation.

This work as a consulting psychologist involves helping nonprofit organizations identify changes they want or need to make, the problems that stand in the way of successful change, and creative strategies for dealing with them. Problem solving is not usually about making the problem go away but, rather, about reducing its impact and learning to live comfortably with what's left. If you empower people in organizations to

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invent strategies for change, using both their creative spirits and principles of psychology, with no effort to force their problems into some formulaic solution, the result can be not only problem resolution, but also an increased organizational capacity to deal with change in the future.

Part of what makes that creative, non-formulaic response necessary is that all change strategies for an organization also require paying attention to a larger context. Just to give a few examples: Postmodern science long ago proclaimed the end of certainty. Communism ended, and technology took a new leading role in everyday life. In 1987, Tom Peters in *Thriving on Chaos* talked about a paradigm shift—not just to a new set of rules, but to a world where the rules keep changing all the time. At about the same time, economic futurist Hazel Henderson said that the fundamental logic error of our times is “assuming anything will ever go back to the way it was” (quoted in Backer, 1997, p. 446). All these new complexities in the world are added onto the specific problems of change nonprofit organizations are wrestling with.

The behavioral sciences offer some time-tested principles that can help consulting psychologists and their clients design—and implement—effective change strategies:

- examining and overcoming fears and resistances people have to change, so that these interfere less with the healthy process of change in the organization—nothing more than the “subtle sabotage of withheld enthusiasm” can undo even the most cleverly designed or most needed change strategy;
- building felt ownership and participation among key stakeholders in a community when change is being introduced—as we all know, the best validated principle in the science on this subject is that the people who will have to live with the results of change must be involved in designing it in order for change strategies to work;

- building and sustaining partnerships among groups and individuals in a community that need to work together in order to meet the challenges of change; and
- addressing the inevitable psychological by-products of change through effective stress management (Backer, 1991a, 1992).

In addition, applying these five approaches means understanding and applying the general principles of human behavior—for instance, that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. And it means analyzing past behavior by looking at what didn't work as well as what did—or to use the phrase of the great spiritual philosopher Joseph Campbell, “dig where you stumble, that's where the treasure is” (quoted in Backer, 1997, p. 449).

The stumbling grounds are not hard to find, either in the public or private sectors. For instance, Harvard Business School professor John Kotter (1995) reported the results of his decade-long study of more than 100 companies and how they've fared in their efforts to implement major new programs inside their organizations. His results are discouraging: “A few of these corporate change efforts have been very successful. A few have been utter failures. Most fall somewhere in between, with a distinct tilt toward the lower end of the scale” (p. 59).

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Michael Hammer, the leading guru of re-engineering, perhaps the most popular transformational intervention of the 1990s, has said that two thirds of all re-engineering interventions have failed—mostly due to staff resistance. Human beings' innate resistance to change is “the most perplexing, annoying, distressing, and confusing part” of re-engineering, says Hammer. Moreover, he goes on to say, resistance to change “is natural and inevitable. To think that resistance won't occur or to view those who exhibit its symptoms as difficult or retrograde is a fatal mistake ... The real cause of re-engineering failures is not the resistance itself but management's failure to deal with it” (Hammer & Stanton, 1995, p. 12).

Thus, the work of change in organizational and community life presents many challenges that a consulting psychologist may be asked to address. Following are some specific lessons I've learned about how to implement the just-stated principles in psychological consultation with organizations—two from each decade of my work in this field!

1970s

Lesson 1: Never Throw Anything Away

The work of change requires paying attention to every little detail you can take in, by being a good observer of people and situations and by using what you learn in creative ways to help the organization find the solutions it needs to move ahead.

- For 10 years I was a police psychologist, doing psychological assessments of police officer candidates and other work for about a dozen small police and fire departments in Southern California. I used to play a game with myself, predicting the outcome of the interview from the first impression a candidate made on me in the waiting room, and doing that forced me to pay close attention to the subtleties of nonverbal behavior. I wasn't always right in my snap judgment, but it helped enormously to start that intense concentration before we were in my office.
- One of my corporate clients was Golden West Television, an early conglomerate going through a lot of difficulty in its transformational change from being owned by cowboy star Gene Autry to being a modern corporation. While I was sitting in a makeup chair, getting made up to appear on one of those 7:00 a.m. public affairs TV shows on their studio lot, the boyfriend of the makeup lady came into the room to tell her about a mistake his production crew had made the night before that had cost the company

\$250,000. Later that day, at a meeting with the top executives, I was able to use that bit of information to force attention to some deep-set communications difficulties for the first time and of course also make a good impression on the CEO, who couldn't figure out how I knew!

Lesson 2: Problem Solving Starts With People Connecting

The work of change means mobilizing resources for problem solving, and one of the best ways to do that is through personal networking—starting every problem solving by asking, “Who do I know who can help with this?” and training client organizations to do the same.

- The examples of this are too numerous to present, but I'll tell a recent tale to reinforce this point—one that started with a famous *New Yorker* article by Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, about the networking abilities of Lois Weisberg, head of arts and culture for the city of Chicago (reported in Gladwell, 2000). When I met Malcolm Gladwell recently at a conference, I intrigued him with a question: What would happen if we put a dozen of the greatest networkers in a room together over dinner? And in a few months, at the house of a local university president, we're doing just that with Malcolm to observe what lessons about people connecting may emerge from this interaction.

1980s

Lesson 3: What You Learn From Consulting With For-Profit Organizations Can Be Applied to Nonprofit Organizations With Surprisingly Little Translation

At the beginning of the 1980s, my consulting practice changed from mostly corpo-

rate consulting to mostly nonprofit consulting, and as I began to work more in the nonprofit sector, I was struck by how little translation in fact was needed. Moreover, as management guru Peter Drucker has made clear in his writing on what he calls the *social sector* (Drucker, 1994), the learning is now two ways, with more business schools requiring their students to learn about nonprofit organizations, not only because of their value to society in solving problems for which there are no market or political solutions, but also because some of the best managed organizations in America now are nonprofits.

Lesson 4: Creative Problem Solving Often Begins by Building Bridges Between Psychology and Other Parts of the World

Two examples of this bridge building from my work are as follows:

- In 1987, the American Psychological Association (APA) and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill conducted the first joint conference between psychologists and families of the mentally ill, a conference I'm proud to have created with Len Goodstein of APA and the late Don Richardson, then heads of the respective organizations. This meeting set in motion some communications between the two groups that continue to this day, helping to overcome ignorance and outdated beliefs that had held us in psychology back from a lively partnership with families of people with schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses (Backer & Richardson, 1989).
- From 1987 to 1993, I co-chaired an industrywide Task Force on AIDS in the entertainment industry with 35 members. A main concentration of this task force was promoting the use of psychological strategies for AIDS education in the Hollywood, Las Vegas,

and New York entertainment industries (Backer, 1991b), and this was communicated to psychology through the 1988 special issue of *American Psychologist* on AIDS (Backer, Batchelor, Jones, & Mays, 1988)—which I edited, and which, incidentally, in a lifetime of publishing, was the most difficult editing I ever did and gives me great respect for those who edit books or journals featuring psychologists!

1990s

Lesson 5: The Work of Change in the Nonprofit World Involves Looking for Leverage Opportunities

Financial, human, or political resources are never enough to do the work of change—we always have to be looking for ways to gain a special advantage. Since 1990, I've been a serious student of philanthropy, and almost all of my individual consulting work these days is with foundations, which present a unique opportunity for leverage in the world, because although they have small resources by comparison with government, they can set any bottom line they want for use of these resources and thus can look for leverage opportunities where a small investment of resources can have a large impact. The Rockefeller Foundation's support in the 1930s of cures for tropical diseases or the support of several foundations for "Sesame Street" and other public TV programs for kids are among the examples (Backer, 1995). Two examples of how leverage opportunities in philanthropy are being explored are the following:

- My institute is working with the Annie Casey Foundation, a large Eastern philanthropy, on an analysis of stakeholders in philanthropy—that is, who comes to the table to help foundations set their philanthropic strategy. We are learning some things that may be very useful for negotiating relationships be-

tween nonprofit organizations and foundations in the future and are applying it on the world scene through a relatively new group called the International Network on Strategic Philanthropy.

- The institute also is working with foundations like the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in Miami, which has recently transformed its entire philanthropic strategy, so that decisions about grant priorities are now made directly in the communities the foundation supports across the country, rather than centrally by its staff or board.

Lesson 6: The Work of Change Goes Better When You Use Yourself as a Part of the Process

I know there has always been a strong culture of objectivity in psychology, and in certain ways this is a good professional stance. And yet some of my most impactful work in recent years has involved making it personal in one way or the other—using personal examples, sharing feelings, and bringing my own philosophy and spiritual belief system to the work in ways I wouldn't have felt comfortable with in previous years.

- This really began with a speech I was asked to give to the university convocation of faculty and students at California State University Long Beach in 1993, and I ended up giving a talk about the importance of spirituality at work, back before that became the popular topic it is now. Perhaps because it was a very personal speech, I got more reaction—letters, articles, and whole books sent to me afterward—than to any other speech I've ever given. When I talked with Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley, recently after a University of California, Los Angeles, speech on the same subject, she said that had been

her experience also. When you're personal, it creates a personal connection that can be very helpful to the work of change.

- I also find it works on the organizational level—that the change work we do at my institute is helped along by the fact that we are also a small nonprofit organization where I have to deal with making payroll and all the other challenges that other nonprofits do.

Finally, let me share with you just briefly one of the first lessons of the fourth decade: I am convinced that one of the keys to surviving and thriving in the uncertain, troubled times we now live in is to do a better job of embracing the inherent contradictions in both man and nature. Walt Whitman (2001, p. 155) spoke of this embrace in *Leaves of Grass*:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large. I contain multitudes.)

In truth, the universe has always been filled with contradictions—the reality of life and death being just one of them. But lately the magnitude of these contradictions has come into much closer focus.

And while there are many strategic, management-driven ways to respond to these changes in the world, one of the most important is in fact a *psychological* response—a re-framing, a figure-ground reversal that lets us see these events in a larger perspective—one that doesn't automatically search for ways of eliminating contradictions but, rather, embraces them as a fundamental part of our existence. We must learn to live with the multitudes of life's contradictions if we are to respond to them effectively. But how do we do that?

Embracing contradictions first means giving up the age-old Western, and especially American, quest to find simple answers to inherently complex problems. There are no clear paths now, no clear-cut answers, yet we

must continue to act and try to find a way to live with these complexities we can't solve in our traditional American "can-do" fashion.

Second, it means accepting that a basic principle of pharmacology applies to all the economic, social, political, and military solutions we're struggling to implement in this brave new world—any intervention that has a powerful main effect also has powerful side effects. This doesn't mean not to act, but it does mean looking up front at how to manage these side effects, rather than assuming we can escape them.

Third, embracing contradictions means acknowledging that while the world has changed dramatically since the events of September 11, in truth many of the sea changes in our lives were already well underway before that terrible date and before the current economic downturn. That brings us back to the principle for handling innovation change, coming from behavioral sciences and implemented by consulting psychologists, which started this discussion.

Fourth, embracing contradictions means accepting that much about the world *hasn't* changed—in particular, the complex, but predictable, human reactions to uncertainty and to the necessity for change, which haven't changed for thousands of years. As Herman Hupfeld's song so famously said in the film *Casablanca*, "A kiss is still a kiss, a sigh is still a sigh—the fundamental things apply as time goes by."

Using these principles can help people and communities embrace the many contradictions now so much more apparent in the world—between democracy and security in the war on terrorism, between setting limits on fear despite some fear being appropriate, between using the tools of planning and recognizing that there are so many situations now when no planning can be done. And perhaps hardest of all psychologically, we must embrace the reality that in these days of horror also are great opportunities for

growth and renewal, as we saw in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake or in the aftermath of World War II. Behavioral sciences also can help with this last challenge, for example, through applying understanding of cognitive dissonance to help us work through our mental reactions to these contradictions and get on with positive, hopeful changes in our lives and work.

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