

“Focus on the negative long enough and things will only get worse with more blame, short-sighted solutions, and a serious draining of human energy. Uncover moments where real transformation has occurred, and you will find innovation, abundant energy, and collective ownership of a more hopeful future.”

Mastering Change

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Are you looking for more effective ways to transform whole organizations and communities to thrive in the 21st Century? When considering the number of conflicts raging around the world, economic instability, terrorism, wars, ethnic divisions, oppression, natural disasters, global warming, natural resource disparity, and more, there is cause for skepticism. However, the field of positive psychology suggests that the frame you choose is the one you get. Focus on the negative long enough and things will only get worse with more blame, shortsighted solutions, and a serious draining of human energy. Uncover moments where real transformation has occurred, and you will find innovation, abundant energy, and collective ownership of a more hopeful future.

Here is the question: Who needs to be involved in the conversation? It's pretty straightforward. People support and defend that which they help to create. If leaders are the ones figuring it all out . . . well, the implementation will likely be added to their personal to-do list. Today's leaders are looking for something different. They are looking to involve more and more people in a way that creates inspired action.

Recently, a group of robust methods have emerged that provide the roadmap for real transformation (Bunker & Alban, 1997 & 2006; Holman & Devane, 1999; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007). Based on the work of Holman and colleagues, over sixty established methods from around the world have been identified. The methods reflect two common practices: high involvement and a systemic approach to

improvement. High involvement means engaging the people in changing their own system. It is systemic because there is a conscious choice to include people, functions, and ideas in order to leverage the highest possible value for the effort invested.

These approaches for systemic engagement are appearing from completely different disciplines such as strategic planning and process improvement to applied arts and urban development (Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007). When a person first looks at the collection of more than sixty methods, a common reaction is questions. What method or methods do I choose? Are there really more than sixty methods? Which one is the best? Are they really that unique? How do I make sense of all these approaches? These questions can be daunting.

Over the last ten years, a master's degree course titled *Engaging Whole Systems* has been addressing these questions and exploring ways to accelerate a learner's mastery of the methods. One particular assignment has had surprising results—affinity diagramming. The participants are given documentation on the sixty-one methods e.g., 21st Century Town Meetings, Appreciative Inquiry, Balanced Scorecard, Charrettes, Conference Model, Drum Café, Future Search, Playback Theatre, Open Space, Six Sigma, Whole Scale Change, World Café, and more—and assigned the task of uncovering patterns and meaning.

Our aim with this article is to provoke a more intentional exploration of the methods through describing the collective

wisdom that has emerged from the affinity diagramming experience. Specifically, we will:

- » Present our findings in a two tiered framework that includes six design elements with core principles intuitively included in the established methods.
- » Provide a meta-analysis of the patterns found among the methods from the affinity diagramming activity.
- » Demonstrate how this activity is a deep learning tool that not only accelerates learning but also builds one's confidence in using the methods.
- » Conclude with five realities for this emerging field of methods.

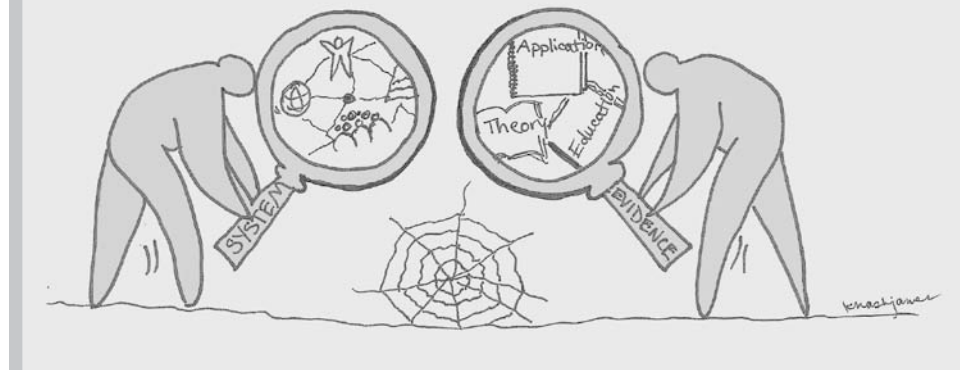
The Affinity Diagram: “A Daunting Task”

An affinity diagram is also known as the KJ method because it was developed by Kawakita Jiro (1975). This diagramming process is intended to uncover meaningful groupings among a long list of ideas or concepts. Similarly, mind mapping, developed by Tony Buzan (1974), is a graphic tool that enables pattern recognition. Together, these approaches provide the means to tap into the cortical skills and utilize the full potential of the brain.

Prior to showing up for the in-person portion of the **Engaging Whole Systems** course, the participants are given the affinity assignment. They are given a basic overview and Readings on affinity diagrams and mind maps are provided. The participants are instructed to review **The Change Handbook** and uncover patterns among the methods. Each person shares their results in small groups, creating group diagrams. Then, each group diagram is shared with the other groups following which class members and teaching staff have a collective discussion of patterns among the whole.

The affinity diagramming activity, in a variety of forms, has been completed by over 300 people in the last ten years. In order to better understand the impact of the experience, we conducted two types of analysis. First, we reviewed the myriad

Figure 1: Design Elements as a Lens



of diagrams and descriptions produced over the years. Second, we conducted ten in-depth interviews with participants who completed the assignment.

A common response from the interviews is one of being “overwhelmed” and “inspired.” At first, the task seems insurmountable. The interviewees mention that they go into the experience focusing on their deficiencies, such as *I am not creative* or *I can't comprehend all of these methods that quickly* or *I'm just not good at this stuff*. Because the assignment is required, they trudge forth into the unknown. As they work, they begin to uncover talents they previously didn't appreciate, and, in some cases, may have viewed as a weakness. They shift to more appreciative comments such as *I am actually pretty creative*. They begin to see their own potential, and as a result develop a new level of confidence in themselves.

The experience is inherently and necessarily messy; we refer to it as “swimming in the goo.” Most seasoned consultants recognize this is part of the journey to mastery. It can be likened to a consultant's first step into a new system undergoing a large-scale change. Learning to see patterns is a skill that can be honed. It just takes a healthy dose of self-reflection and perseverance.

Uncovering the Patterns: “A Two-Tiered Framework”

Based on our analysis, we found a two tiered framework embedded in this body of methods that helps to uncover the wisdom of this work (see Figure 1). The first tier is a set of design elements. The second tier is a set of principles within each element. This two tiered framework can be seen in other more established fields and industries.

Let's take designing a home as an example. There is a set of elements common to any home that includes the foundation, frame, electrical systems, plumbing, etc. And, within each element there are certain principles. With the electrical element, for instance, there are principles for the installation of the electrical system that ensure that the home and its appliances are safe for use. The application of these principles within the elements ensures that each home is successfully built to meet the unique needs of the homeowner. If you leave out an element or ignore a principle, problems are bound to arise sooner and definitely later.

Here is how we arrived at the two tiered framework. As we looked at the methods and attempted to uncover patterns, we noticed that the patterns themselves grouped into like categories. It seemed that the more established methods answered a series of implied questions (see Table 1). The inventors of the methods didn't have these questions to begin with. Rather, they implicitly addressed these questions in order to create a method that could be understood and adopted by the widest range of people.

We call these categories Design Elements, because they are critical ingredients inherent in the established change methods. They are the underlying truths of the work (Cady & Dannemiller, 2005). After identifying each design element, we sought to ensure that they met the tests of face and discriminate validity. That is, on the surface does the label and definition of the element make obvious sense (face validity)? And, can we distinguish each of the elements from the others (discriminate validity)? This resulted in a few years of conversation with the number of elements going from eight

Table 1: Design Elements & Underlying Questions

Design Element	Questions
SYSTEM	• Where and in what conditions is your method being applied? • What kind of organization or community is your method best suited to help? • Who and how many people do you involve in the process?
PURPOSE	• Why use your method? • How are the organizations and communities different or better off from using your method? • What results can be expected from the process you facilitate?
JOURNEY	• What are the steps in your method's process? • How long does it take or how much time is required? • What do you do to support follow-through?
EVIDENCE	• What background and experience do you bring to this method? • What theory and research has been conducted on your method or used in the development of your method? • What examples can you provide where your method has been used successfully?
VALUES	• What are the "simple rules" that guide your application of the method? • What core beliefs do you bring to your work? • What will or will you not do?
MODEL	• How do you describe your method so that most people can understand it in a brief or extended conversation? • What are the key visuals and models that represent your method? • How can someone learn more about your method (books, articles, presentation, workshops, website, community of practice, etc.)?

to five. It is now resting at six: system, purpose, journey, evidence, values, and model. These six design elements can be posed as questions for anyone who wishes to learn a method, mix and match methods, and even invent their own method:

We have been surprised by another unique, added value of doing affinity diagramming - accelerated mastery. It seems that the process speeds up the capability of the learner by more than one or two years. How does this happen so quickly? The interviews suggest that the diagramming and mapping forces participants to synthesis their learning unlike other techniques. Bloom's Taxonomy (Benjamin Bloom, 1956) identifies the following six levels of learning or skill: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The activity created an environment where the learners arrived to the first in-person meeting with a baseline understanding. It set the stage for them to move from "Analysis to Synthesis" in a very short period of time" (M Foxon, personal communication, May 15, 2007).

By uncovering the patterns, the elements serve as a bridge to more quickly utilizing the methods. In Figure 2, we present a summary of three applications for the design elements in the Cycle of Mastery: Method, Blend, and Invention.

Method Mastery

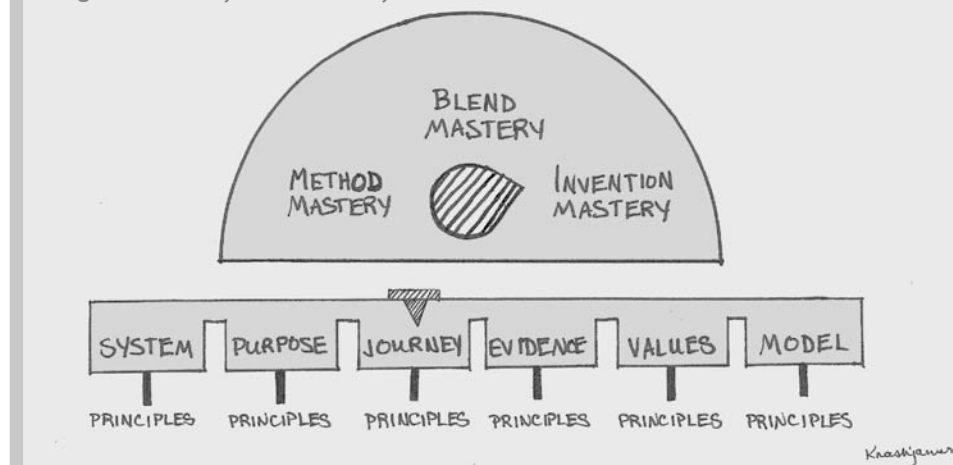
You can use the design elements to dissect the various methods. Just as Gray's

Anatomy provides dissection models of the human body, the six elements provide a dissection lens for understanding the methods (Parmer, 2006). As mentioned, the affinity diagram activity is completed prior to the participants showing up for the first in-person meeting of the course. The very first time the assignment was used, the participants showed up for the first meeting having already moved beyond the learning agenda for the whole session. We had to go back to the drawing board in order to take the learning even deeper. They came with great questions, direction, and a willingness to jump in and try things out.

Blend Mastery

If you utilize the elements to dissect the methods, you will uncover a menu of activities that engage people throughout the change process. Once you tease these out and distill the intention of each, you can use the various activities in a blended fashion. The art of blend mastery is in the mixing and matching of methods for a particular setting. Blend Masters build on their method knowledge base and add more to their repertoire. They intuitively know what to use when, where, and why. They see the distinctions and bring them together in a seamless fashion. They are confident in their integration of techniques, applied in a "real time" manner, in order to meet the needs of the moment.

Figure 2: The Cycle of Mastery



Invention Mastery

The founders of the established methods instinctively included the various design elements. The affinity diagram process helps us to uncover their wisdom. It took these inventors years of work, experimentation, and learning to eventually craft a method that gained attention and attracted a broad community of practice. The design elements implicitly emerged as they naturally or intuitively designed to these elements. It is for this reason that the elements act as accelerators for developing and producing new things like a change method or specific techniques. The elements ensure that a method is complete. Just as an automobile cannot be complete without an engine or a drive train, a method cannot be complete without a purpose, process, or set of values.

Principles of the Methods: “Shedding Light on Intuition”

As the methods are applied in a system or situation, there are underlying principles that ensure the method is adapted uniquely while adhering to the wisdom of the work. This is the key to mastery. As we explored the various affinity diagrams produced over the years, we found some emerging principles within each of the design elements.

System

A system is defined by its characteristics, and this is where the notion of stakeholders has emerged. One way to think of a system of people is as two or more groups working towards a common goal—implicitly or explicitly, knowingly or unknowingly. For example, “An organization should function holistically much the way the human body does” (Parmer, 2006). Parmer went on to propose that “Whole system transformation creates a synergy of all systems within the body (organization) to function as one rather than separate *parts* of the anatomy.” Hence, the goal of whole system transformation is to connect all things within and around a system.

When looking across the methods and

the way that systems are described, there is a tendency to refer to things like size, boundaries, diversity, structure, and setting or industry. Also, the system is viewed by level of application: individual, group, and whole. When focusing on the whole, it is differentiated as either organization or community. Yet, it doesn’t stop there; we found a noticeable shift to a more global application of the methods.

Purpose

The survival of a system, whether it is an organization or a community, is surely based on purpose. If system is the *who*, then when we talk about purpose, what we really are talking about is the *why*. What are the reasons for this event? Why get together? Why change? Why care? Purpose also makes a case for how the system will be different. By speaking and acting from purpose, we begin to notice that others may relate to us at that same level. We begin to notice that although we are different, we are also very much the same. Purpose connects us. It creates a sense of unity (Dannemiller, James, & Holman, 2001).

The methods share a focus on the overall difference experienced and key results achieved (i.e., purpose and outcome). If purpose guides the design of the method, then outcomes seem to be the sales pitch or the invitation. Looking across the methods, it becomes readily apparent that each has some sort of coming together language and a “to” statement meaning “in-order-to accomplish what?”

Journey

The journey is the roadmap for achieving the desired purpose and obtaining specific outcomes. It is a series of steps that are taken to guide the process. These steps are characterized by key actions, important questions, critical decisions, and ways to evaluate progress (Cady & Dannemiller, 2005). These roadmaps provide reassurance and guidance similar to a AAA Trip Tik, a Yahoo map, or a detailed tour agenda for a vacation trip overseas.

Many of the methods originally focused on a main event often called

a “summit”, “retreat”, “meeting”, or “conference.” These events were moments when the whole of the organizations, or a representative group of the whole, came into a room synchronously. Over time, the methods have evolved to use language focused on the journey. The journey is comprised of a series of converging events facilitated by either internal or external consultants, and these consultants usually don’t work alone. There is a trend toward describing ways to transfer the competencies into or throughout the system being engaged, yet this intention also seems to require the presence of a facilitator whose role is to maintain a safe container.

Evidence

Evidence-based design is a common notion in the fields of education and social work. The notion is that interventions have clear evidence to demonstrate the espoused or intended effect. What we found is that the established methods had a solid base of evidence to show the method’s robustness. The more robust the intervention, the more predictable its impact across a variety of situations. Robust interventions work, even in situations where some of their basic assumptions are violated or stretched beyond original intent.

Ensuring that methods are grounded in solid evidence is important, because there is a spirit of innovation in the air. There appears to be a sharp increase in the number of new methods. There are three key pieces of evidence required. They can be called the three requirements for sound design: experience & knowledge, theory & research, and direct & indirect examples. There are now second and third generation methods emerging. It is important that we “build on the shoulders of those who have come before us” (Alban & Scherer, 2005).

Values

Values guide behaviors. The values can be seen as people act and interact with each other. The founders of the methods emphasize that they live their values every day and at every step along the way. We

found that some common values expressed among the methods are:

- » Moving people from passivity to action
- » Creating a maximum mixture of stakeholders
- » Getting each one to see what others see
- » Basing work on democratic principles and equality
- » Doing no harm
- » Building trust through collaboration
- » Living or loving from the heart

Condensed, we may state that the methods are based upon democratic ethical principles that apply to all participants.

Model

Nothing can more quickly undermine a successful change effort than the facilitator being challenged by a not so naïve participant around the concepts in a particular methodology. If you're implementing a Six Sigma based methodology, and you're discussing an error rate that is three standard deviations from the norm, you better know exactly what you're talking about.

The method's model is what encapsulates its intellectual knowledge and packages it for mass consumption. The more established methods seem to be very good at making their approach accessible. They have a framework that clearly represents the core concepts. That is, the methods have been designed, visually framed, and described in a way that is easy for others to understand. They have also done this within their own language. In so doing, the methods have "lingo" in the form of labels and definitions. These models are accompanied by visuals in the form of graphics, tables, and charts.

For example, consider the dramatic rise of Appreciative Inquiry as an established method now used around the world. Consider the Four D model—Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. The Four Ds is a precise model, with very clear language, and there is a sense of coherence to the packing of the whole approach (Hammond, 1996).

A Challenge for the Future "Where Do We Go from Here?"

In addition to using affinity diagramming to assess the methods and conducting personal interviews with class participants, we also reviewed the methods' history, interviewed the founders of various methods, explored whether other universities are doing similar inquiries, and held a conference at Bowling Green University, *Nexus for Change*, focused solely on these methods. What do we know about this loose collection of methods thus far? There are Five Realities that suggest the timing is right to take a more serious collaborative look at this emerging field of whole system engagement:

Reality #1—The methods come from a variety of disciplines and places around the world and are making a profound difference in the organizations and communities.

Reality #2—There is no agreed upon name or label for this loose collection of methods that is used to coalesce knowledge, awareness, and understanding.

Reality #3—These methods have vibrant communities of practice with limited contact among each other.

Reality #4—Little research has been conducted to understand how the methods impact the systems they touch.

Reality #5—Few universities provide courses or programs on the methods.

This article is a beginning point for conversation. There is much more work to be done to uncover the patterns and create a knowledge-base that supports the legitimate advancement of the field. Imagine each of the communities of practice coming together to form a community of communities. Broaden this to include the voices of the leaders (participants and clients) and other change agents, and then bring in the view of researchers and educators (corporate, university, and more). What would be

possible? What might we learn, invent, and shape? How might we collectively advance this emerging field in a way that significantly effects our world? Our charge to you, and to all of us who care about these methods and their potential to change our world, is the following:

Let's bring together the various perspectives, in order to generate more serious attention to these methods and to the legitimacy of their application to real world issues, challenges, and needs.

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