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IGNORING THE INTERIOR

Some Hypotheses About Why Collaboratives Often Fall Short

In June 1999, I stopped work. I had no idea what I would do. I just knew I had to stop.

Prior to 1999, I had worked for almost 10 years as a consultant designing and facilitating large scale community change efforts. One of the most expansive of these efforts was Smart Start, a statewide initiative in North Carolina to insure that every child begins kindergarten healthy and read to succeed. Another effort, sponsored by the Foundation Consortium, sought to design structures to accelerate and deepen learning among county collaboratives working to improve the lives of California's children and families.

Most of my work during this period engaged collaboratives at the state and county level, well over 100 of them by 1999. While the particular results sought by these collaboratives varied, all were dedicated to making substantive improvements in the lives of children and families. Most often the strategies these collaboratives pursued focused on changing the human services delivery system.

I believed passionately in my work, and the work of these collaboratives . . . and . . . toward the end of the decade, I began to face a sobering reality. While some collaboratives had achieved important changes in some of the systems they confronted, most had failed to make significant progress toward their change agenda. Many had become little more than funding disbursement structures; others were beset by internal political struggles that rendered them essentially impotent.

Why? Why had most of these change efforts failed to make substantial progress? When I let myself finally articulate this question and feel the gravity of it, I knew I had to stop work. I didn't have a satisfactory answer to this question, and I couldn't continue working without one.

So I stopped. And moved to New Mexico. And for the next year and a half, deepened my spiritual practice, and went in search of some answers to my question. I would like to share with you some tentative responses to this question. What follows are not assertions of unequivocal truth; rather, they are hypotheses about some of the more subtle forces that undermine collaborative efforts to improve the lives of children and families. I share these reflections in a spirit of mutual discovery.

A framework for understanding the dimensions of change

Philosopher Ken Wilber has written extensively on the origins and evolution of consciousness. He posits that consciousness evolves through four inter-related but distinct dimensions: individual interior, individual exterior, group interior and group exterior.

As I have worked with Wilber's framework, and applied it to my experiences designing and facilitating complex change efforts, I have developed the following adaptation as a framework for understanding *dimensions of change*:

	Interior	Exterior
Individual	Thoughts Feelings Sense of identity Motives and purpose Imagination and dreams ...	Behaviors Skills & competencies Public commitments ...
Group	Purpose Values and norms Feelings—e.g., safety Alignment of individual, group, and higher intention Organizational culture ...	Budgets Technology Systems Organizational structures Collaborative agreements ...

First, let me describe my adaptation of the four quadrants.

The upper left quadrant represents the *individual interior* dimension of change. This refers to an individual's interior life, including his or her thoughts, attitudes, feelings, dreams, sense of purpose, intention, and subconscious.

The upper right quadrant is the *individual exterior* dimension of change. This realm involves an individual's behaviors, skills and competencies, and public commitments, those aspects of his or her life that manifest physically.

The lower left quadrant is the *group interior* dimension of change. This refers to the interior dimensions of a group or community's experience. What is the group's purpose? What are the values and norms that guide the group's actions? What feelings are present inside of the group? What is the nature of the interaction between the intentions of the individuals who are part of the group and the group's collective intention(s)?

The lower right quadrant is the *group exterior* dimension of change. This realm involves changes in structures and systems: the budgets we create; the work plans, collaborative agreements, and other documents we produce; the organizational structures we support, and so forth.

As I sat with Wilber's reflections on the evolution of consciousness, and began to think about these four quadrants in relationship to community change efforts, I began to develop several hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the levels of change we hope to achieve in our communities and in our human service systems *require* change in all four quadrants.

The second hypothesis is that most collaboratives focus most of their energy and resources on the lower right quadrant, the group exterior dimensions of change. We spend enormous time and effort creating collaborative structures, getting the right people to the table, exploring how to reform budget and personnel and other systems. Sometimes collaboratives also focus on the upper right quadrant, the individual exterior dimension of change. For example, sometimes departments discover that key leaders do not have the skills they need to work well within the new

structures that are evolving, and so invest in leadership development training or other skill building efforts.

Rarely do collaborative efforts invest substantial energy in the group interior dimension of change. Sometimes collaboratives will begin their initiative with some attention to this dimension, meeting to build consensus around a set of priority results or a vision statement. They may also craft some guiding principles or articulate some overarching values to support their efforts. But frequently the group will approach this work more as a task than as a serious ongoing effort to develop deep, shared intention. One way to test for this is how often a collaborative revisits the questions of vision or priority results during the course of its lifetime. Usually, these conversations, if they happen at all, happen in the early stages of formation, never to be engaged again.

And if collaboratives rarely confront the work of the group interior dimension of change, they almost never engage the individual interior dimension of change. Most often, this dimension of change is seen as beyond the scope of the collaborative's efforts, or inappropriate for public bodies or initiatives to engage.

The first two hypotheses lead logically to the third: that collaboratives will fail to achieve the levels of change they seek if they ignore or do not successfully engage all four dimensions of change.

Making this concrete: applying this analysis to the Results for Children Initiative

In our conversation at the upcoming Academy, I will expand on this framework in a number of ways. For now, let me offer some preliminary examples of how this analysis may apply to your work in the Results for Children Initiative (RCI).

Results-based accountability

I am a close friend of Mark Friedman's and have for years adapted his framework to the work I do with collaboratives. I believe deeply in its potential to help transform our human service systems and communities.

I also believe, however, that the way most collaboratives work with Mark's framework undermines much of its transformative potential.

How? By limiting their work around results to the exterior dimensions of change while ignoring the interior dimensions of change.

Let me illustrate this hypothesis with a story.

In 1980 a 13 year old California girl died when she was hit by a hit and run driver. The driver was drunk; in fact, he had been out of jail on bail for two days on another hit and run drunk driving crash. A small group of women came together after this tragedy and made a commitment to each other: they would dedicate the rest of their lives to an outcome: to end fatalities due to drunk driving. For some 20 years now Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) has relentlessly pursued this outcome. How?

MADD has certainly pursued strategies in the group exterior dimension of change. For example, their legislative efforts have helped dramatically increase the penalties for drunk driving. But in addition to these change agendas, they have also aggressively pursued strategies to develop a *shared community conviction* that drunk driving is no longer acceptable. They have done this by reaching out to informal networks in communities across the country: churches, neighborhood groups, civic groups, police fraternities, and myriad others. In turn, these groups and communities have devised strategies of their own: red ribbons on car antennas; free cab rides during the holidays for people who have drunk too much; signs on highways from families commemorating the life of a family member killed and urging people to stop drinking and driving, and countless others.

The sociologist Max Weber wrote: “When community mores are strong, laws are unnecessary; when community mores are weak, laws are irrelevant.” MADD has understood the truth of Weber’s observation by focusing much of its work on the collective interior dimension of change while also pursuing legislative and other group exterior change initiatives.

The result: a steady decline in the number of fatalities due to drunk driving.

Most of the collaboratives I know that are working with results based accountability spend perhaps a day or two word-smithing results statements. Then they turn most of their efforts to group exterior work: data systems, budget structures, funding initiatives, grant making programs, and on and on. Very little energy is devoted to building a deep, profound community wide consensus around these results.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing that work in the group exterior dimension of change is unimportant. It’s vital. And, as vital as this work is, I do not believe that transforming our human services delivery system will, by itself, deliver the results we long for. For us to significantly improve the lives of children and families in our communities will require far more than services; it will require many different sectors of our community, including parents, neighbors, civic groups, churches, businesses, and many others, to develop an alignment of intention and action. MADD could not have predicted nor organized all of the ways communities have acted in alignment with their desired result; as communities internalized the result, they began to fashion creative strategies of their own.

How will we know when a community has begun to internalize a commitment to a particular result? Here is one image: when United Way thermometers come down, replaced by thermometers all over town tracking the progress the community is making toward the result. Here is another: while waiting for the new and improved data system to be installed, the collaborative organizes a network of “discernment circles” in neighborhoods across the county. These discernment circles comprise key neighborhood leaders— teachers, ministers, block group leaders, grandmothers, small business owners, others—who agree to meet monthly. The purpose of these monthly meetings is to hear from each person about what they are seeing in the neighborhood that relates to the result. Each quarter representatives from all of the circles meet to share their anecdotal data and to talk about what is working in the neighborhoods and what new challenges are emerging.

I offer these images not as recommendations necessarily, but rather as illustrations of how we might know when a community has begun to internalize a commitment to a particular result. What data would tell you that your community (not just the Board of Supervisors or a small leadership group, but the community more broadly defined) has begun to internalize a commitment to one or more of your priority results?

Inclusive governance

Many collaboratives around the country have begun to understand the vital importance of inclusive governance. But again, many of these collaboratives focus most of their work in the group exterior dimension of change: e.g., insuring that membership guidelines for the collaborative and other committees requires representatives from the community's diverse constituencies; translating documents into multiple languages; encouraging departments and agencies to examine their hiring practices to insure that front line workers and managers reflect the community's diversity.

Are these actions important, even necessary? Yes. Are they sufficient for the collaborative and its various governing structures to *embody* a commitment to inclusive governance? No.

Given the history of our culture, I believe that any group who seeks to fully embrace a commitment to inclusive governance cannot do so without engaging both the group and individual interior dimensions of change. To engage the group interior dimension of change, a collaborative would need to, at minimum, pursue a disciplined and sustained exploration of the ways its practices may violate its commitment to inclusivity. Meeting times and places are obvious issues here, but so are the subtle and often unspoken power dynamics in meetings, and the unnamed ways that decisions may *really* get made. Equally important, a group needs to regularly explore how effectively it is creating safe places for open inquiry, learning, and discovery. My experience leads me to a hypothesis that most groups and individuals in our culture have not yet developed the skills required to create and participate in such spaces of open inquiry.

Beyond the group interior dimension of change, I also believe that collaboratives committed to inclusive governance must also encourage their members to work deeply in the individual interior dimension of change. I believe every one of us has been impacted by our culture's patterns of power, patterns that have systematically excluded people because of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and other attributes. And the more unconscious we are of the ways we are impacted, the more likely we are to replicate these patterns in our public and personal lives.

Making a commitment to inclusive governance is not a trivial undertaking: beyond the extraordinary changes it invites in the exterior dimensions of change, it also necessitates extraordinary work in the interior dimensions of change. Such work requires diligence and profound courage.

Please know that I have a deep appreciation for the work each of you has undertaken, and an abiding passion for the results we all seek. The reflections I offer here resonate with my current experience and intuition, and I am deeply curious about where they mirror your own experiences and intuitions, and where they don't.

I look forward to our conversation at the Academy.