

# Chapter 12

## Whole-System Discovery

**MOST OF THE SECTION** on discovery has been written from the perspective of a third-party approach, the third party being the consultant who is doing the data collection, analysis, and feedback. While this is the most typical expectation clients have of us, and also the way we have traditionally seen the consultant role, there is an alternative.

The option is to involve the whole client system much more directly in redefining the problem, naming a desired future, outlining alternative actions, and deciding how to proceed. This is a first-party or whole-system strategy, and the methodology has come a long way in the last ten years. Many consultants have adopted the whole-system approach and redefined their role to be one of convening people to collectively develop a change strategy. What is significant about this is that the people doing the discovery and making the recommendations are the same people who will implement the change. In other words, people from the whole system are involved early in the process and are active at every step.

The name, “whole system,” though, is a little misleading because the whole system is not literally involved. You can have representatives from all parts of a system in the room, but not really everyone. It means that at least a large sample of those who will be acting on the recommendations is going to play a major part in creating them. It makes the change effort more self-managing than a third-party approach.

What also is important about a whole-system approach is that it looks at the entire system, not its parts. It can involve a cross section of people that approximates a whole system much more directly and earlier than a third-party approach. A first-party or whole-system strategy engages entire units to self-assess their current reality and plan how to improve it.

Each strategy—third party or whole system—has its advantages and limitations, and I want to outline them briefly. As you read, remember that your goal in each consultation is to catalyze action, not just to have an accurate assessment.

## Third-Party Consulting

The most traditional third-party process involves the lone consultant, who studies the situation and makes recommendations for improvement. The consultant may come from inside the organization or be an outsider. Sometimes the third party is a team of people from inside the organization that is given the charge of coming up with recommendations. Often called **design teams**, these groups may number ten to fifty people, and they have six months (or whatever) to work on the project, after which they are expected to return with recommended actions that management can endorse and implement. Even though the design team involves more people than the traditional, lone consultant arrangement, and members are taken from the organization itself, it still represents a third-party strategy: Whenever some individual or group develops a solution for another, it is taking a third-party stance.



The rationale for employing a third-party approach is that consultants, and design teams, have special expertise and are positioned outside the specific system in question, even if only temporarily. This is supposed to lead to a certain objectivity and a willingness to confront difficult issues that people inside the system may be unable or unwilling to face. In addition, third parties may be aware of possibilities that people closer to the problem may miss. The idea of combining a design team with an outside consultant has the added advantage of applying local, intimate knowledge of the problem. The belief is that, given adequate time for analysis and reflection, the partnership of consultant and design team, which is composed of organization members who know the work well, can make more practical and actionable recommendations than a consultant alone might offer.

The strength of any third-party strategy is objectivity. Third parties offer an independent point of view, an outlook that is not colored by being so part of a culture that they cannot see it in a new way. When we can so easily see in others those things that we are blind to in ourselves, why not use a third party to help us see ourselves? The third-party path also has the power of management sponsorship and the unique energy and impetus for improvement it may provide. We believe that if management supports the change, maybe even models it themselves, we are well down the road to making the change happen.

The limitation of third-party help comes from the separation between the discovery and the doing. Third-party recommendations have to be sold to management, and then management has to either mandate or sell the ideas to the employees. The very process of selling is based on flawed premises: It pretends that there is a right answer to the problem, that the consultant or design team knows the right answer, and that, in good engineering fashion, the line organization can (and should) be persuaded to accept the answer and act on it.

In some cases, especially when the problem is strictly technical in nature, there may be a right answer, and it may be accepted and implemented on its own merits. In most cases, however, this thinking is naïve. Whenever there are questions of management or employee commitment or issues of developing new skills or new organizational relationships, the prescriptive engineering or medical model ends in modest change at best. At worst, even if the third party's answer is right, it still may not be acted on, even with unqualified management sponsorship.

## Taking a Whole-System Approach

There are times when the people affected by the change can join you in the process of discovery, recommendation, decision, and implementation. This is the whole-system approach, whereby the parties to the change work through the process on their own behalf.



The essence of whole-system discovery is to get everyone in the room at the same time. This deepens an organization's sense of community and allows people to operate with the same information, a common database. All hear what is said, and you avoid the limitations of having a few people planning what is best for a large group.

The main advantage is that there is no need to sell a set of actions to anyone, especially to people at lower levels of the system. When the goal is to build internal commitment to a set of changes, selling is the worst way to do it. People will resist change being inflicted on them, no matter how compelling the case.

The power of the whole-system approach lies not so much in management sponsorship, but in the high engagement and involvement of the entire organization. The whole-system process doesn't proceed without sponsorship, for management will be in the room, but it doesn't bet on

sponsorship so heavily. It is a bet on collective knowledge, collective purpose, and the commitment that grows out of deciding for oneself.

"Whole system" means you want representatives from all parts of a system in the room, but not literally everyone in the client organization. This way, at least a large sample of those who will be acting on the recommendations is going to play a major part in creating them. It makes the change effort more self-managing than a third-party approach.

On the other hand, if the whole system can literally be in one room together and the work of the organization allows it, go with everybody in the room. Then you don't have to struggle with building a bridge between the sample of people in the room and those who were absent.

## Your Choice

The value of the whole-system approach is that it engages entire units to self-assess their current reality and plan how to improve it. Making a choice about a consulting strategy, then, means deciding whether to give priority to the special expertise and neutrality of the consultant, which leads to a third-party approach, or to give priority to people's commitment to implementation, which might tilt the scales toward a whole-system approach.

Here are some considerations:

### Third Party

- Neutral observer. No stake in the answer
- Broader view. Has seen many organizations and ways to approach the problem
- Has specialized expertise that does not reside in the unit
- Simple decision-making process. More manager control of decision
- Has outsider credibility

### Whole System

- Decision-making process creates higher commitment to implement
- People deciding are the ones who have to make it work
- Greater local knowledge. People are intimate with the situation
- More realism. People know what is doable and what will work
- The learning stays with the organization

## Putting Whole-System Discovery to Work

The actual technique of bringing a large number of people together to assess the situation, define a future, and talk about action goes by many different names. Because it can work with several hundred people in the room, it is often called “large-group methodology.” Other proponents focus on the involvement it provides and call it a “high-interaction” approach. Because it tries to embrace all the players at once it also can be called “large scale” method. The name isn’t important, really, as long as it gives a feel for the intent of whole-system methods.

### Whole System

The number of people is limited mostly by the size of the room. The sessions usually last for two or three consecutive days. A design team, usually guided by a consultant, typically plans the large-group event, but they focus only on the process and do not get into statements of the problem or solutions. They deal with questions of whom to invite, what is the right focus for the meeting(s), and how to manage the logistics and stage the activities. For specifics on how to do it, there are some good books by Kathie Dannemiller, Marvin Weisbord, Sandra Janoff, Billie Alban, Barbara Bunker, Dick Axelrod, Emily Axelrod, and others listed in the bibliography.

What is special about whole-system discovery methods is the faith they express in people's capacity to name their own problems and find ways to address them. A whole-system process says that we do not need an outsider, or a special team of insiders, to tell us who we are and what we are up against. If we can create enough trust and are willing to be honest with each other, every unit has within itself the capacity to make changes that are needed.

### Having the Right Stuff

To make this approach work, consultant and client have to give up some control and start down a quite unpredictable path, one quite different from the way the organization usually operates and probably not destined for comfort. Here are the conditions that have to be present:

- *There has to be complete transparency* Management has to be willing to state to the group all they know about the current reality. This includes financial information, progress on important goals, any failures occurring, and how the organization is doing in meeting its key promises to its constituents. If management is contemplating any changes in structure or functions, these need to be on the table, regardless of the anxiety it might create.
- *Management joins the proceedings as full participants* The session is led by the design team or planners and consultant. Each manager is one among many. Management's ideas are no better than anyone else's. While management may decide to retain some veto power, it will be hard to use without creating cries of manipulation. This is a good model when management is willing to be vulnerable to the same thing they have prescribed for others.

- *The groups must be a full cross section of the whole system* This means that support people and every level of management and worker, even those from other units that have an important tie to the system, are involved.
- *Differences in status, power, title, and function disappear during the process* There is a level playing field, and all enter the work as equals. Each working team in the session will have several levels and functions represented. Participants must be willing to cross social and organizational barriers.
- *Employees have to come ready to speak up* We ask that they suspend their caution and cynicism for a couple of days. They don't have to forsake caution and cynicism forever, but the meeting is not designed as a forum for complaint and response; it is a co-created event where all have answers and all have questions.
- *If employees choose not to participate, they surrender their right to complain or be heard* No claiming later that they were not part of the decision. Rights of citizenship are earned by the choice to participate.
- *There is an emphasis on the future and what the group wants to create together* There is some discussion of obstacles and the current reality, but the strategy is to talk more about what we want to create tomorrow than how to fix what we've got today.
- *The session ends with agreements on next steps and who is going to work on them* Management and employees have to be willing to allow next steps to emerge out of this session. Everyone gives up some control.
- *Consultants give up the expert role* We no longer analyze the data, make recommendations, and follow up. Our role is to conduct people through a highly participatory series of steps. We become less central, less visible, and less able to be an advocate for a certain answer.

Each of these conditions moves the organization in an egalitarian, self-governing direction. That is the power of the strategy, but also its limitation. Managers cannot start this process of sharing power and then pull back at moments of doubt and nervousness.

## The Payoff

My intent in introducing you to whole-system discovery is simply to explain why this method is important and show how it changes the role of the consultant. But I must also admit a certain inclination toward using a whole-system strategy whenever possible.

If the conditions are right, it has a real advantage over a third-party stance in the way it builds the capacity of the organization to manage itself in the future. It also keeps the consultant in an educational role. It demands that we develop our ability to design learning experiences for others. And it requires that we expand our skills in how to convene and bring people together, how to encourage them to question their current reality and envision their future, and how to confront them with their freedom and responsibility through interactive activities, as opposed to confronting these issues in a more traditional, face-to-face way.