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Building a Team of Passionate Callers to Enrich Education in Croatia

ABSTRACT
This article is about a group of eight people joined by a common idea – a strong call to enrich education in Croatia so that it motivates leadership and empowers children. Through use of the philosophy and methodology of Appreciative Inquiry, this informal group of people has gradually developed into the core team of a potential national movement.

Appreciative Inquiry as a guiding principle

Croatian reality is not usually organized around such forms of conversation. Our team is a rare example of alternative approaches to finding sustainable solutions. In order to describe the process of building and engaging our team, this article examines our group process with reference to specific dimensions of Chaordic design and presents our generative relationship using the STAR model.

We decided to apply AI principles from the very beginning. We started from the assumption that everybody has good experiences to learn from, followed by the fact that what people focus on becomes their reality. We also had an appreciation of valuing our differences and were aware that the act of asking questions starts change. The team focused their discussions around positive examples of education, building common vision and sharing dreams, rather than analyzing the current situation and proposing solutions.

Chaordic dimensions within an AI framework

The article describes the development of generative relationships among the members of our group. A generative relationship 'produces new sources of value which cannot be foreseen in advance.' (Lane and Maxfield, 1996)

The group started on the edge of chaos and order, where common desire and vaguely articulated guiding question meet reality. We used knowledge acquired in the Art of Hosting workshop, where most of the members met. [The] 'Chaordic path between chaos and order leads us to the new; to collective learning and real-time innovation.' [1]

The purpose, principles and participants are discussed within the context of the team building process through Chaordic dimensions. Although the design and delivery phase have been created within AI framework, the remaining dimensions

1 Taken from course materials.

Figure 1: Chaordic shell from http://
www.chaordic.org/cd_process_
activities.html
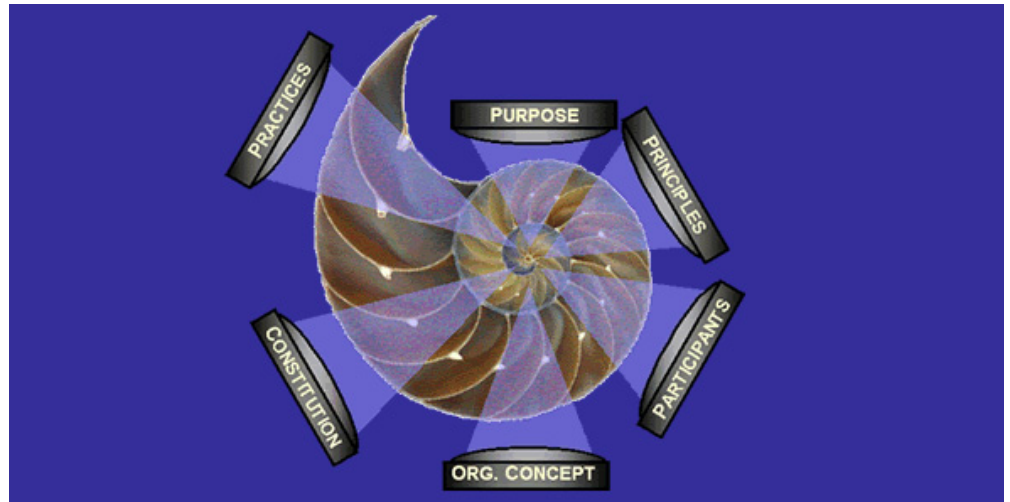
of Chaordic design (organizational concept, constitution and practices) have not yet been implemented.

Participants

The idea for the project began at the Art of Hosting three days workshop and training held in February 2010. The Art of Hosting is a 'set of practices for facilitating group conversations of all sizes, supported by principles that:

- Maximize collective intelligence

- Welcome and listen to diverse viewpoints

- Maximize participation and civility

- Transform conflict into creative cooperation[2]

During the course of practising ProActive café methodology, the topic of education for better leadership emerged. One of the participants was inspired to suggest the creation of a group. Fellow participants who shared the same enthusiasm created a team. A couple of others joined afterwards.

The team is made up of highly educated people aged from 31 and 42, six women and two men. They vary in educational background and professional experiences, but share a common understanding of the need to change guiding educational values in Croatia.

In the first meeting, eight of us undertook an appreciative inquiry of our best experiences of working in teams, and how those experiences realized our potential in a motivating environment. Building a collective mind-map increased group energy in the harvesting phase. Shared stories that inspired us helped common understanding by rapidly building mutual trust and bonding so that we could work together. For example, we found that common ground and an AI approach helped us to go quickly from 'the theme attracted me to come here' to 'I feel confident that together we will be creating something that matters'. The process, although created by few team members, follows 'best team' approach described by Bushe (2010).

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2 taken from http://www.artofhosting.org/home/ visited August 2010

The Art of Hosting training, February 2010

Purpose

The purpose of our group and work is defined by the question 'How can we create an educational system that empowers children and motivates leadership?'

The core purpose was defined in the first meeting and recorded in the meeting note:

Zagreb, 4.3.2010

Purpose:
- Initiate change in the educational system in Croatia
- Create a network of people who can design and implement the change in the educational system

The core purpose of our group project is to motivate leadership and develop individuals as well as looking for organizational potential. The project is geared towards establishing new possibilities which are more purposeful for both adults and children. The ultimate goal is to help create more fulfilling lives in a better world. The group is eager to cooperate with multiple stakeholders in our existing educational system, but also ready to initiate new forms and organizations for life-long personal development.

During this period, our team process was moving from the discovery and dream to the design phase.

Principles

Cockell (2010) describes the current dynamics of our core team development well: 'Critical appreciative processes combine the appreciative and the critical. These processes could enhance the possibility of magic, the transformation that happens when groups of people collaborate effectively by being interconnected and authentic, present, with each other. The group transforms to be more than the individuals put together and/or the group process aggrandizes the learning.'

The 'making magic' during the divergence phase around our common purpose is so enjoyable, that the group has been putting lots of time and energy in extensive talking, sharing stories and dreams.

Zagreb, 15.4.2010

'People, I loved our dance between chaos and order, control and flexibility... letting go, loosening up, releasing ... Anyway ... I have plenty to say about our today's meeting ... several personal insights, many ideas, ... and all of it now being integrated in my brain and my body and dreams will do their role too ... so I am convinced that something good will be born out of it ... if a baby is going to be born in my place or any of your places, I believe that everyone in the family will accept the newborn ... or maybe we will bring to this world our collaborative baby (so you know, this is quite possible and will be completely normal in the future!)' [Excerpt from meeting notes]

It is important to note that although the group discusses principles such as creating our space in virtual reality as a substitute for a physical location and regular physical meetings, no concrete action in this direction has been taken yet.

Also, despite the fact that meeting notes are regularly distributed among team members, they typically represent shared reflections and excitement about building common vision of what might be. Even when action points or decisions are recorded, there is no follow up activity.

Rijeka, 10.5.2010

Conclusion: volunteering + smart (and other similar associations) = good partnership for action. The next point from the followup flipchart: pilot project – to go or not to go into such a project?

Yes, we all say, but with awareness of the limited influence and benefits of such work. Final conclusion: definitely provide support for such projects! [Excerpt from meeting notes]

The STAR model representing the team's generative relationships
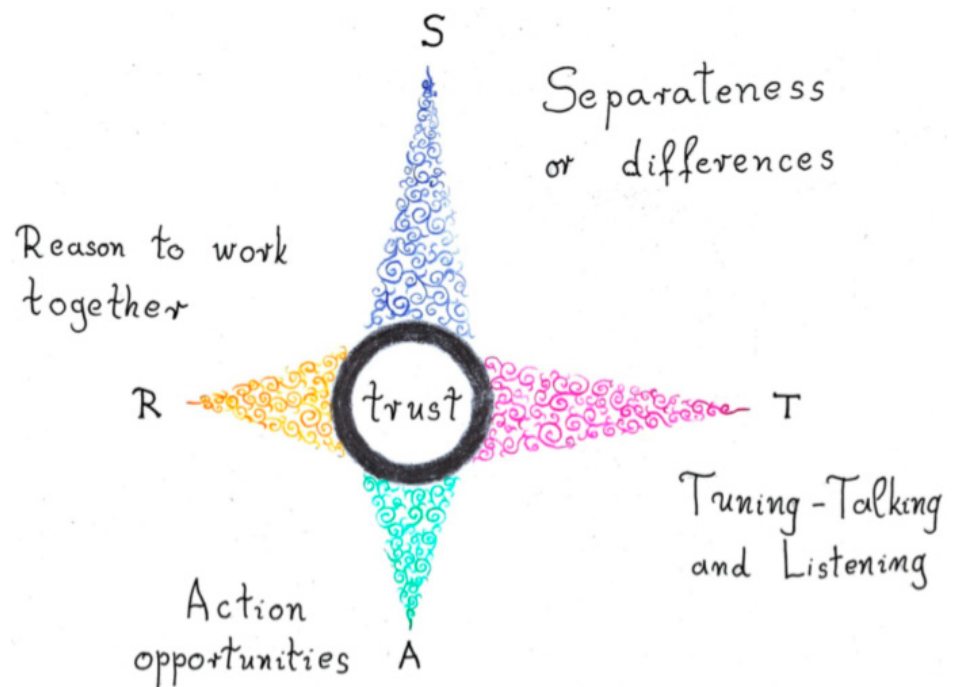
Following the Zimmerman STAR representation of generative relationships, the team has developed strong talking capacity, with a huge potential for action. STAR is:

S – separateness or differences between the group members ensure wide and different perspectives.

T - long and intensive tuning – talking and listening 'dates' allow group members to exchange, reflect and openly and constructively challenge each other's assumptions and standpoints.

A – action, co-creation of the new something, has not been taken thus far.

R – reason to work together and being aligned in a project provide a room to talk and learn together. Action might happen in newly initiated groups organized around core team and coordinated with the common vision.

The STAR model visually and clearly reflects the state of the group's generative relationship and the challenge to the group for further development.

Organizational concept

Recently, the group has started drafting general organizational concept by detecting the role of the core team in wider context: '…we as a group don't want to be mainly involved just in one venture/activity/business – we think we have to "host the core process" to be "hosts of the hosts". That means that we, as a group, initiate and foster joint platforms (network, summits, web-portal, hostings) and keep some kind of overview of main activities/ventures/businesses/whatever, that make important impacts on the education system in Croatia (being networked in what important is going on a global level) – it includes us being individually involved in some particular ventures/projects, and have some hands-on experience.' [Excerpt from an email addressed to a potential international partner, July 2010]

Conclusion

For the time being, we have experienced the crystallization of a few ideas from the chaos. This opening up and divergent phase took some time to be accepted. After a couple of meetings, the initial frustration with the lack of clear purpose has been replaced with the feeling of being blessed to be able to participate, explore and dream together. Our group potential is drawn from our individual purposes, not from any outside interest or being in anybody's service.

In the next few months, the group will be challenged with the convergent phase, when new solutions will emerge and realization of new ideas will require facing the real world with various stakeholders. This will potentially bring some new insights into the AI summit methodology and further strengthen the relevance of this case.

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