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As we approach not only the November elections but also Lincoln's 200th birthday, it seems appropriate to reflect on his legacy. Why do so many consider him to be the greatest president in U.S. history? Regardless of one's office, what lessons can we learn from such an individual to apply in our own organizations?

An analysis of Doris Kearns Goodwin's epic biography of Lincoln, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (Simon & Schuster, 2005), shows that the lynchpin of Lincoln's prodigious emotional intellect was his empathy. Lincoln created a systemic understanding of his time by using his strong sense of empathy to read hearts and minds. In popular culture, empathy is sometimes derided as a form of weakness. Lincoln's life challenges this stereotype. We create the world around us through our own actions. Lincoln consistently forged function out of chaos with magnanimous gesture after magnanimous gesture. Time and again, Lincoln's insights into others de-escalated conflict and cemented relationships, both personal as well as political. Building on Goodwin's painstaking research into the people and events of Lincoln's life, this article examines the relationship between Lincoln's empathy and the following facets of his emotional intelligence: de-escalation, storytelling, self-awareness, self-regulation, humor, and reflection.

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# EXECUTIVE EMPATHY: LINCOLN'S ANTIDOTE TO ESCALATION

BY PETER W. PRUYN

"The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend!"

—Abraham Lincoln

As we approach not only the November elections but also Lincoln's 200th birthday, it seems appropriate to reflect on his legacy. Why do so many consider him to be the greatest American president? Regardless of one's office, what lessons can we learn from such an individual to apply in our own organizations?

Doris Kearns Goodwin's epic biography of Lincoln, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (Simon & Schuster, 2005), is no better place to explore the answers. By interweaving the biographies of members of Lincoln's cabinet, Goodwin creates a systemic portrait of the administration that saved the Union. Through this meticulous examination of the interrelationships among this group, we learn about its leader with a richness that would be unlikely any other way. Remarkably, many of these men were political rivals. Yet in spite of the conflict among them as well as surrounding them, Lincoln forged a team that would prevail.

What struck me most while reading *Team of Rivals* was how the lynchpin of Lincoln's prodigious emotional intellect was his *empathy*. Time and again, Lincoln's insights into others de-escalated conflict and cemented relationships, both personal as well as

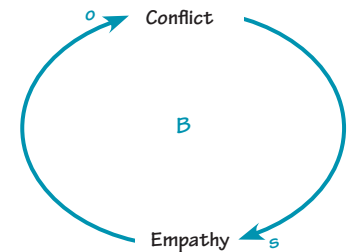
political. Building on Goodwin's painstaking research into the people and events of Lincoln's life, this article examines the relationship between Lincoln's empathy and the following facets of his emotional intelligence: de-escalation, storytelling, self-awareness, self-regulation, humor, and reflection.

Popular culture sometimes offers the two-dimensional image of Abraham Lincoln as a moral but depressed emancipator. Goodwin introduces us to his depth as a man who was "plain and complex, shrewd and transparent, tender and iron-willed" (p. xv). He displayed, "a fierce ambition, an exceptional political acumen, and a wide range of emotional strengths, forged in the crucible of personal hardship, that took his unsuspecting rivals by surprise" (p. xvi). Goodwin observes that "Lincoln's political genius" allowed him "to repair injured feelings that, left untended, might have escalated into permanent hostility; to assume responsibility for the failures of subordinates; to share credit with ease; and to learn from mistakes. . . . His success in dealing with the strong egos of the men in his cabinet suggests that in the hands of a truly great politician the qualities we generally associate with decency and morality—kindness, sensitivity, compassion, honesty, and empathy—can also be impressive political resources" (p. xvii).

### Empathy and De-escalation

When I first wrote the outline for this article, I listed empathy and de-escalation as separate sections. It became readily apparent, however, that virtually every example of Lincoln's empathy *was* an example of de-escalation; their relationship was causal (see "Conflict/Empathy Cycle").

### CONFLICT/EMPATHY CYCLE



One way to think about how Lincoln's empathy affected his ability to manage conflict is with a balancing loop. As conflict increased, it caused his empathy for the other party to increase. As his empathy increased, it reduced the conflict. As the conflict then decreased, Lincoln could focus his attention elsewhere. As his empathy for the other party went down, sometimes the conflict would return. This cycle would then repeat.

Goodwin begins her exploration of Lincoln's empathy with its relationship to his melancholy. Lincoln "possessed extraordinary empathy—the gift or curse of putting himself in the place of another, to experience what they were feeling, to understand their motives and desires. . . . His sensibilities were not only acute, they were raw." As a young man, Lincoln once "stopped and tracked back half a mile to rescue a pig caught in a mire—not because he loved the pig, recollected a friend, 'just to take a pain out of his own mind.'" Helen Nicolay, the daughter of Lincoln's private secretary, concluded, "With his wealth of sympathy, his conscience, and his unflinching sense of justice, he was predestined to sorrow."

Yet in the political arena, this same sensitivity would be Lincoln's greatest asset. Nicolay astutely observed that, "His crowning gift of political diagnosis was due to his sympathy . . . which gave him the power to forecast with

### TEAM TIP

Take inspiration from successful leaders and teams, wherever you may find them—history, sports, music, or science.

uncanny accuracy what his opponents were likely to do.” After listening to colleagues at Whig Party caucuses, Lincoln would extrapolate: “From your talk, I gather the Democrats will do so and so . . . I should do so and so to checkmate them.” He would intuit “the moves for days ahead; making them all so plain that his listeners wondered why they had not seen it that way themselves” (pp. 103–104). In this way, Lincoln’s empathy did not prevent him from competing politically; to the contrary, it enabled him to do so successfully.

The duality of his empathy as both a blessing and a curse is a recurrent theme in his life. Lincoln’s trips to visit troops in the field exemplify this dynamic. His bodyguard, William Crook, observed how Lincoln “seemed to absorb the horrors of the war into himself.” Lincoln experienced “agony when the thunder of the cannon told him that men were being cut down like grass” and anguish at the “sight of the poor, torn bodies of the dead and dying on the field of Petersburg.” His “painful sympathy” was extended impartially not only to “the forlorn rebel prisoners” but also to “the devastation of a noble people in ruined Richmond” (pp. 723–724).

The Civil War would present innumerable opportunities for Lincoln’s empathy to de-escalate a potential conflict and transform it into a valued relationship. In one instance, three Confederate slaves being used to build a rebel battery escaped from their master. The Union general Benjamin Butler refused to return the slaves to their owner on the grounds that the slaves were being used to further the rebel cause. As Butler was a conservative Democrat, his action was unusual. Despite their political differences, Lincoln rewarded Butler by promoting him to brigadier general. In a letter to Lincoln, Butler wrote that he accepted the commission but wished to be frank that in the prior election he had done everything he could to oppose Lincoln. He reassured Lincoln that, “I shall do no political act, and loyally support your administration as long as I hold your commission; and when I find any act that I cannot support I shall bring

the commission back at once, and return it to you.”

Lincoln replied with typical magnanimity: “That is frank, that is fair. But I want to add one thing: When you see me doing anything that for the good of the country ought not to be done, come and tell me so, and why you think so, and then perhaps you won’t have any chance to resign your commission” (pp. 368–369). How many senior leaders are secure enough to order their subordinates to disagree with them? Lincoln recognized that surrounding yourself with those who are willing to disagree with you builds error-checking into your decision-making.

**Lincoln’s empathy not only gave him insight into the suffering of others, it aided him in communicating these insights.**

Nor was Lincoln beneath apologizing. Goodwin describes that when Lincoln found out “a hastily written note to General Franz Sigel had upset the general, he swiftly followed up with another. ‘I was a little cross,’ he told Sigel, ‘I ask pardon. If I do get up a little temper I have no sufficient time to keep it up.’ Such gestures on Lincoln’s part repaired injured feelings that might have escalated into lasting animosity” (pp. 511–512).

Lincoln’s friends were more likely to hold political grudges on his behalf than he was. When a congressional colleague celebrated the defeat of a political rival, Winter Davis, Lincoln remarked, “You have more of that feeling of personal resentment than I. A man has not time to spend half his life in quarrels. If any man ceases to attack me, I never remember the past against him” (p. 665).

Lincoln’s empathy not only gave him insight into the suffering of others, it aided him in communicating these insights. When Lincoln’s secretary of war, Edwin M. Stanton, refused to grant a political appointment desired by two congressmen, Lincoln eloquently supported the decision. Lin-

coln described Stanton to the congressman as “the rock on the beach of our national ocean against which the breakers dash and roar, dash and roar without ceasing. He fights back the angry waters and prevents them from undermining and overwhelming the land.” Lincoln marveled at Stanton’s very survival in a position that was “one of the most difficult in the world,” and therefore saw that it was his “duty to submit” to his secretary’s decision. By so doing, he led the congressmen to do the same (p. 670).

Lincoln’s famous second inaugural address in 1865 (“With malice towards none; with charity for all”) was once again guided by his empathy—even for a war-time enemy. Goodwin observes, “If the spirited crowd expected a speech exalting recent Union victories, they were disappointed. In keeping with his lifelong tendency to consider all sides of a troubled situation, Lincoln urged a more sympathetic understanding of the nation’s alienated citizens in the South.” Lincoln represented the North and South as being more the same than different: “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes” (p. 698).

One cannot help sense that for Lincoln “the other” equaled “the self.” Nowhere was this clearer than in Lincoln’s orders regarding the reassimilation of enemy soldiers after they surrendered. When General Sherman asked for guidance on how to handle the defeated rebels, Lincoln answered that “all he wanted of us was to defeat the opposing armies, and to get the men composing the Confederate armies back to their homes, at work on their farms and in their shops.” Lincoln wanted the citizens of the South to “have their horses to plow with, and, if you like, their guns to shoot crows with. I want no one punished; treat them liberally all round. We want those

people to return to their allegiance to the Union and submit to the laws” (p. 713).

One of the greatest sources of conflict within Lincoln’s cabinet was his secretary of the treasury, Salmon P. Chase. A former rival during the 1860 bid for the presidency, Chase never stopped campaigning, in some form, even while a member of Lincoln’s cabinet. When this conflict finally came to a head and Chase resigned, Lincoln still did not write him off. To the contrary, he nominated him to be chief justice of the Supreme Court. When Lincoln first announced this nomination to one of Chase’s friends, the colleague was dumbfounded: “Mr. President, this is an exhibition of magnanimity and patriotism that could hardly be expected of any one. After what he has said against your administration, which has undoubtedly been reported to you, it was hardly to be expected that you would bestow the most important office within your gift on such a man.”

Lincoln’s reply was matter-of-fact: “To have done otherwise I should have been recreant to my convictions of duty to the Republican party and to the country. As to his talk about me, I do not mind that. Chase is, on the whole, a pretty good fellow and a very able man. The only trouble is that he has ‘the White House fever’ a little too bad, but I hope this may cure him and that he will be satisfied.”

Lincoln would later confess that he “would rather have swallowed his buckhorn chair than to have nominated Chase” (p. 680). He was still human; he clearly felt the sting of his former secretary’s insubordination. He simply did his best to rise above his own ego in service of a greater good.

### Storytelling

Crafting a story that connects with an audience is ultimately an act of empathy. Lincoln was a seemingly bottomless treasure trove of anecdotes for all occasions. He learned this craft from his father, Thomas. But before he could learn how to tell stories, Lincoln first learned how to listen.

As a young boy, Lincoln would sit “transfixed in the corner” listening to his father’s colorful anecdotes. He would then spend “no small part of the night walking up and down,” putting his father’s stories “in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend.” Goodwin recounts that “The following day . . . he would climb onto the tree stump or log that served as an impromptu stage and mesmerize his own circle of young listeners” (p. 50).



As an adult, Lincoln’s stories became more than mere entertainment: “They frequently provided maxims or proverbs that usefully connected to the lives of his listeners. Lincoln possessed an extraordinary ability to convey practical wisdom in the form of humorous tales his listeners could remember and repeat” (p. 151). His mastery lay in the ability to distill complexity into terms that anyone could understand, thereby enabling others to propagate his considered insights.

Navigating the intense factions of slavery would provide perhaps the greatest test of these talents. Approaching the 1860 convention, one hotly contested national issue was whether slavery should be allowed to spread to the new western territories. Over several speeches, Lincoln refined the following metaphor to describe the decision facing the nation: “If I saw a venomous snake crawling in the road, any man would say I might seize the nearest stick and kill it; but if I found that snake in bed with my children, that would be another question. I might hurt the children more than the snake, and it might bite them. . . . But if there was a bed newly made up, to which the children were to be taken, and it was proposed to take a hatch of young snakes and put them there with them, I take it no man would say there was any question how I ought to decide. . . . The new Territories are the newly made bed to which our children are to go, and it lies with the nation to say whether they shall have snakes

mixed up with them or not.”

Goodwin insightfully contrasts this rhetorical approach of Lincoln’s with that of his future secretary of state, William H. Seward. Seward likened slavery to allowing “the Trojan Horse” to enter the territories. While such a classical allusion might have reached Seward’s peers, it lacked the “instant accessibility” to the average citizen of Lincoln’s “homely” story (pp. 233–234).

Lincoln’s rhetorical approach to slavery had grown out of his prior experience with another divisive issue: temperance. In each case, empathy with both sides enabled his insightful understanding of the issue. He advocated that temperance activists avoid “thundering tones of anathema and denunciation,” for such tactics would only be met with more of the same. Independent of the truth of one’s cause, whether it be temperance or slavery, condemning one’s opponent would only cause him to “retreat within himself, close all the avenues to his head and his heart.” The heart, alone, was “the great high road to his reason” and therefore must be reached first to win another over (pp. 167–168). Creating an effective path to do so could only be accomplished by first standing in the other’s shoes.

Goodwin observes that “as a child, Lincoln had honed his oratory skills by addressing his companions from a tree stump” (p. 140). As an adult, these skills would become Lincoln’s connection with people. Lincoln understood that the most important responsibility of his office was to educate: “With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts or pronounces decisions” (p. 206). His molding of public sentiment was achieved through storytelling, and his storytelling was made effective through his empathy.

### Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation

Lincoln was not merely aware of the emotions of others; he also possessed an acute awareness of his own emotional needs. In spite of a tendency towards melancholy, this awareness enabled him to self-regulate his moods

more effectively than any other member of his team, providing a critical foundation of emotional stability in the midst of national instability (p. xvii).

The essence of self-regulation is first having the awareness of one's emotional needs and then acting to meet them. Lincoln knew intuitively when he had to make "a deposit" in his personal "hope account," as well as those of others. One activity that sustained not only him but also others was his strategically timed visits to the troops in the field. The sight of Lincoln in his stovepipe hat would elicit cheers from the troops. The act of the president visiting their camps in person—at no slight personal risk—gave the troops inspiration, and inspired troops inspired Lincoln. Seeing each other escalated hope. Attending plays at Grover's or Ford's theaters would become another favorite means for Lincoln to achieve emotional "respite and renewal" (p. 609).

### **Humor**

The theater was also an arena in which Lincoln exercised another self-regulation mechanism: his prodigious sense of humor: "His 'laugh . . . stood by itself. The neigh of a wild horse on his native prairie is not more undisguised and hearty'" (p. 613).

Meanwhile, as with his empathy, his melancholy was the shadow side of his humor. Goodwin emphasizes a distinction between depression and melancholy, the latter containing "a generous amplitude of possibility, chances for productive behavior, even what may be identified as a sense of humor" (pp. 103, 723). His humor was a willful way out of this "cave of gloom." Lincoln laughed, he explained, "so he did not weep. . . . His stories were intended 'to whistle off sadness'"—not only for others but for himself as well.

Lincoln's humor wasn't just for humor's sake; he had an uncanny ability to meld humor into the gravest of circumstances, often providing resolution without offense. During peace talks with a Confederate envoy, the envoy offered King Charles I as an example of a figure who made numerous agreements "with his adversaries despite ongoing hostilities." Lincoln responded, "I do not profess to be posted in history.

. . . All I distinctly recollect about the case of Charles I, is, that he lost his head in the end" (p. 693).

When the career of his recalcitrant secretary of the treasury, Salmon P. Chase, was on the line, Chase wrote Lincoln asking for an audience. It is hard to read Lincoln's classic reply without yearning for an opportunity to use it: "The difficulty does not, in the main part, lie within the range of a conversation between you and me" (p. 632).

Much to the consternation of many in the army—but not surprisingly—Lincoln was liberal with issuing military pardons. Such weighty decisions were yet another opportunity for Lincoln to deftly interweave empathy and humor. Lincoln wrote the following passage as part of a pardon to an army officer who was facing a court-martial for giving in to his temper during an altercation with a superior officer. Just as noteworthy is to whom this paternal wisdom is being imparted: the brother-in-law of none other than Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's one-time political nemesis:

No man resolved to make the most of himself, can spare time for personal contention. Still less can he afford to take all the consequences, including the vitiating of his temper, and the loss of self-control. Yield larger things to which you can show no more than equal right; and yield lesser ones, though clearly your own. Better give your path to a dog, than be bitten by him in contesting for the right. Even killing the dog would not cure the bite (p. 570).

Lincoln could find humor in every nook and cranny of daily experience. During one of his visits to the front, he traveled on a naval flagship. Turning down the admiral's own room, Lincoln insisted on taking a cramped room only "six feet long by four and a half feet wide" (p. 715). Lincoln joked the next morning that while he had slept well, "you can't put a long blade into a short scabbard." During the day, the Admiral arranged for carpenters to knock down the wall and enlarge both the room and the bed. The next morning, Lincoln "announced with delight that 'a greater miracle than ever happened last night; I shrank six inches in length and about a foot sideways.'"

### **Pausing to Reflect**

Lincoln rarely acted in anger. This was not because he was immune to anger but because his self-awareness guided him to pause to reflect before acting.

Writing was one act that was conducive to such a thoughtful dynamic, observed Lincoln's secretary, John Nicolay. Lincoln frequently wrote using a process of cumulative refinement, coming back to a passage over days or weeks to hone it to his satisfaction. As a result of the well-crafted substance of his writings, Lincoln's oratory has withstood the test of time.

Salmon P. Chase's ambition for the presidency tested Lincoln's composure more than once. The release of a pamphlet critical of Lincoln's administration was the last straw. But by holding back from admonishing Chase when the circular became public, Lincoln gave his friends the opportunity to rally in support of him. In this way, Lincoln thwarted Chase without having to take direct action, thereby moderating the potential personal conflict between them.

The self-discipline of pausing to reflect allowed Lincoln's empathy to return to the forefront of his decision-making and be the guiding force behind his actions, rather than his anger. When General George Meade failed to capture Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg, Lincoln was initially inconsolable and penned "a frank letter" to the general. While being grateful for his success at Gettysburg, Lincoln admonished him for "the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape." As a result, "the war will be prolonged indefinitely." Before sending the missive, however, Lincoln must have thought through the emotional consequences upon the reader. Years later, the letter would be discovered in an envelope labeled, "To Gen. Meade, never sent, or signed" (p. 536).

### **Lincoln's Leadership Legacy**

Lincoln created a systemic understanding of his time by reading hearts and minds through empathy. In popular culture, empathy is sometimes derided as a form of weakness. Lincoln's life challenges this stereotype. We create the world around us through our own

actions. Lincoln consistently forged function out of chaos with magnanimous gesture after magnanimous gesture. These gestures, in fact, helped Lincoln secure the 1860 Republican nomination, not because he had the greatest experience, but because he had the fewest enemies. Such circumstances were manifest by his empathy throughout his career.

Surely, the positive effect of his approach was magnified because of his office. Executive empathy wields more influence than subordinate empathy. Even so, during the turbulent days of the Civil War, the impact of Lincoln's legacy had its limitations. While he was able to save the life of a nation, he was ultimately unable to save his own.

How would Lincoln's behaviors clash with our modern technologies? If one's response to an angry letter is crafted with a fountain pen and delivered by horseback, pausing to reflect is built into the process. Modern wireless communications technologies discourage such reflection. What are the consequences? What are our choices?

Through his empathy, Lincoln saw everyone in terms of a potential relationship, a connection worth nurtur-

ing. With such an enlightened consciousness, is anyone a rival?

It is difficult to reflect on Lincoln and his time without reflecting on our own fragile, fractured world. Perhaps hope for informed action comes in the form of a simple question: "What would Lincoln do?" ■

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#### NEXT STEPS

Following are some guidelines for implementing Lincoln's lessons in your organization:

**Empathy and De-escalation.** Take a walk in your rivals' shoes. What are they seeing? Feeling? What are their fears? Their insecurities? How might these insights inform your actions?

**Storytelling.** Identify the essence of the complexity your organization is facing. What anecdote would distill that essence into terms with which your audience would not only connect but enjoy repeating? What universal parable is right for this moment?

**Self-Awareness.** Take an inventory of your moods. Do your emotions support or hinder your purpose?

**Self-Regulation.** What productive detour might help realign your heart with your intention? Where are your organization's "front lines"? Who are your "troops"? Visit them where they are. Give yourselves permission to celebrate each other.

**Humor.** How many times have you told a story of a conflict from ages past—only to laugh as you told it? What's absurd about this current conflict? Is it possible to summarize any serious advice with humorous kindness?

**Pausing to Reflect.** Do you have to respond to an attack immediately? Reflect on the potential benefits of waiting before reacting. Of the conflicts that you are currently engaged in, which might sort themselves out in time—all by themselves?



## SYSTEMS STORIES

# THE PROMISE OF SYSTEMS THINKING FOR SHIFTING FUNDAMENTAL DYNAMICS

BY SCOTT SPANN AND JAMES RITCHIE-DUNHAM

**P**eople in Guatemala—smart people—were working harder,

### TEAM TIP

When people are working harder and yet a problem symptom fails to improve, ask, "Do we understand the fundamental dynamics of [the problem]?" Use some of the tools in this article to improve your knowledge of the system.

hiring brighter people, raising more money, doing better projects, and getting improved results. And yet, what they sought to eliminate—poverty—was getting worse. So, we asked what we thought was a relatively straightforward question: "Do you understand the fundamental dynamics of poverty?" As it turned out, no one had an answer—not the government, NGOs, local communities, or business leaders.

We set out with CARE Latin America to understand this complex

problem. We engaged leaders of the national intelligence service and the military policy and leadership institutes, on the one hand, and members of the former guerrilla movement, on the other; leaders of the Catholic church and the leading Mayan philosophers; the head of the president's commission on local economic development and leaders in local villages; in total, 30 diverse, sometimes historically conflicted, perspectives.

Many thought it would be impossible for these diverse actors to come

together in the same room; for them to reach shared understanding about the impact they each had on their world; and for them to agree about how to act together to change their world for the better. Yet, in a surprisingly short time, by integrating principles and practices from systems thinking and system dynamics with those rooted in group dynamics and collaboration building, representatives from these stakeholder groups were able to create a simple, one-page representation—an integrated systems map—that they all agreed represented their world. This map included all of the system's parts, their interactions, and their goals. It clearly showed why the groups were experiencing conflict and what they needed to do about it. Representatives then came to shared agreement about the overall goal of their collective work. And they identified a handful of critical resources that would enable them to move it in the direction they all want it to go.

Naturally, several questions come to mind. How did they make such a major shift in such a short time? Can this success be replicated? Can it be scaled? In the spirit of Peter Block, the answer to all these questions is “yes” (see *The Answer to How is Yes*, Berrett-Koehler, 2001).

Broadly speaking, the group achieved success by focusing on building relationships and developing clarity, first as individuals, then as partners, teams, and organizations, and finally extending to their constituents and society. As a result of this process, they developed six abilities at each of those levels—*leadership, trust, innovation, execution, scalability, and sustainability*.

The group used tools you're likely familiar with: individual interviews and causal maps of diverse stakeholder worldviews; conversation around key themes using dyads, triads, and small groups; mission building (insisting on positive, measurable, time-specific goals) to ensure alignment; behavior over time graphs to assess anticipated performance of that mission over time; causal mapping and validation of the fully integrated system as a whole; systems analyses (including archetype analyses, trends analyses, cross-impact matrix analyses, and stakeholder assessment

matrices); group-as-whole meetings for inclusion, engagement, deliberation, and decision making; and, finally, organizational and community dialogue and networking about the process and results.

### A Deeper Dive

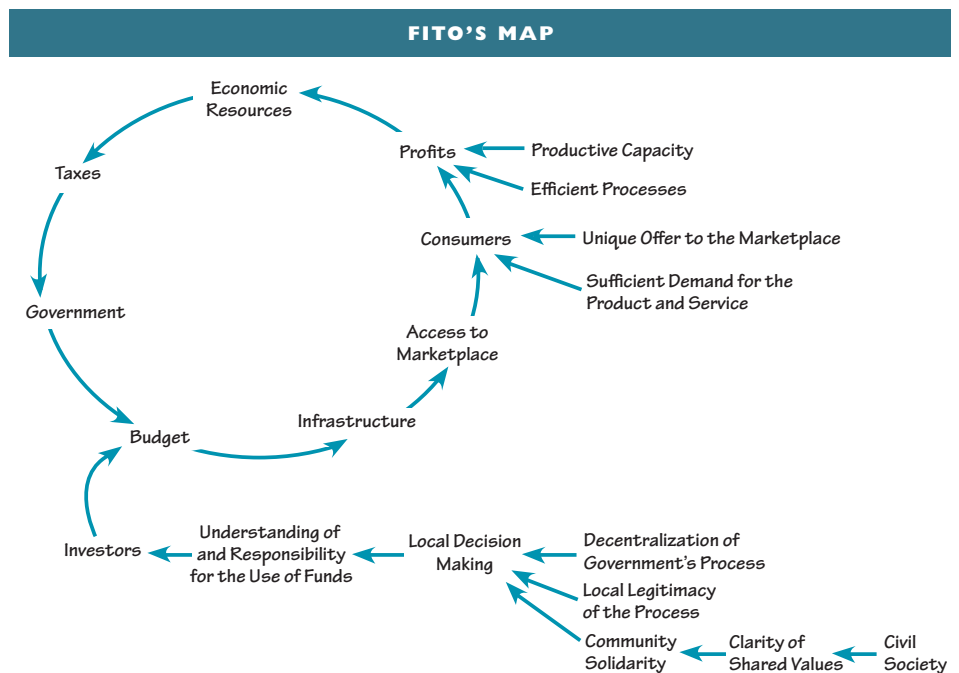
Now for a deeper dive into how the group accomplished its goals, here's a more or less chronological flow with a bit of detail to give you a feel for what we did to build capacity at the individual, partner, group, organizational, constituent, and societal levels. (For more on this process, you can download the article “Impossible” at [www.innatestrategies.com](http://www.innatestrategies.com).)

**Individual Leadership.** The first thing we needed to know was what the leaders in this system really cared about as human beings, regardless of the stated goal of their organizations. What caused them to devote themselves to their work? What did they envision for *whom*—their children, students, grandparents, indigenous peoples—or for *what*—the forests, rivers, lakes, fields, wildlife? We set aside the stated goal of “eliminating poverty” and in one-on-one interviews asked participants what they were committed to in measurable, time-specific terms.

From these kinds of questions came rich, compassionate, human stories at every level and in every sector of Guatemala. Then we asked the leaders to tell us their success stories about how they had done something similar in the past, had seen it done, or planned to do it, that is, to give us their mental models of how the process would unfold. We applied principles from systems thinking and system dynamics to help them flesh out their thinking, get clearer about their leadership role, and consider how they really can and will cause the change they believe is needed.

We reflected this information back to participants in the form of simple causal diagrams that captured their stories, their goals, and all of the parts and interactions. The diagrams clarified their thinking at a higher level and added value to their ability to perceive, think, and act as leaders. As a result of the process, we came to know them, care about them, and even add value to them. And through the work, they came to trust us and the process in which they were about to engage. For an example, see “Fito’s Map.”

**One-to-One Trust.** Then, we shared the participants’ stories with the group,

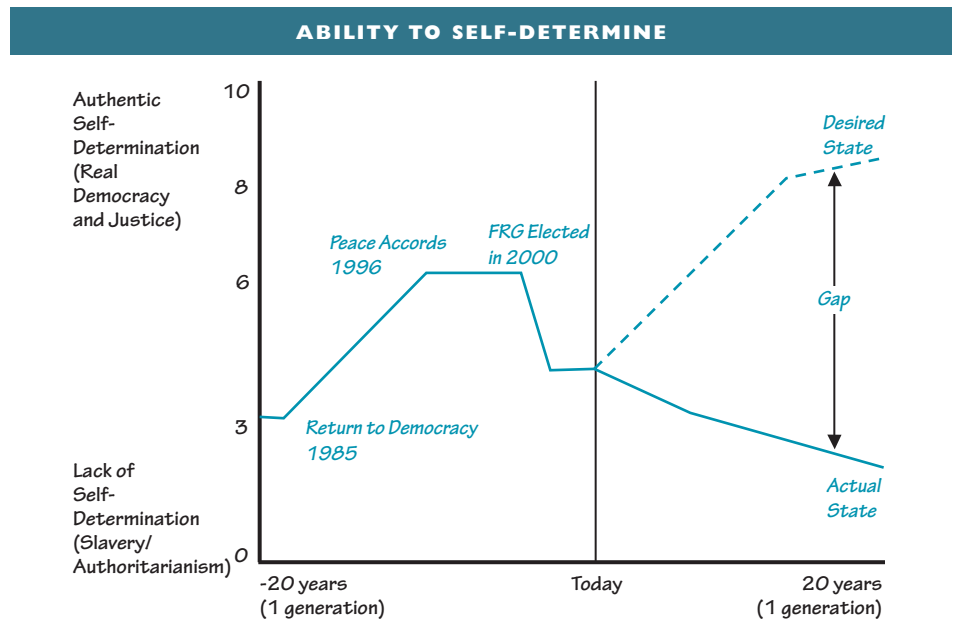


The facilitator's created simple causal diagrams that captured participants' stories, their goals, and all of the parts and interactions.

either in words or through the maps. People emerged with a new level of understanding, respect, and even appreciation for their perceived “adversaries” in the system. When one set of leaders could see and understand what other leaders cared about and were committed to, how thoughtful and rigorous they were about achieving their goals, and how competent they had been in other situations, their unquestioned assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes shifted almost immediately. A new level of trust emerged and, with it, a new level of conversation. These changes stuck over the long run. Today, the leaders are attending one another’s meetings, engaged in one another’s networks, and sharing information, ideas, and solutions.

**Group Innovation.** Unfortunately, we still had a problem. We had entered the system through the portal of “eliminating poverty.” That’s a negative goal, and negative goals don’t work very well, because they don’t clarify what people truly want or are trying to create (see Robert Fritz’s *Path of Least Resistance*, Ballantine, 1989). It’s hard to visualize a negative goal (try it!). So, working from the foundation of trust and clarified understanding that had been created, we identified a small subset of themes and created subgroups (we adapted this practice from Yvonne Agazarian’s work on the interplay between individual, subgroup, and group-as-a-whole dynamics; see *Systems-Centered Group Therapy*, Guilford, 1997). Subgroups are critical for building collaborative capacity because they bridge the gap between individual conversations and full-group conversations, enabling those who think they are already aligned to first discover, as Agazarian would say, “the differences among the apparently similar” and, then and only then, “the similarities among the apparently different.”

For example, when we brought together the subgroup focused on the elimination of poverty, the members all assumed that it would be the “same old” conversation—but it wasn’t. We quickly discovered that we couldn’t even agree on what poverty was (for example, some people without shoes and living on the land were quite happy and didn’t consider themselves poor even when others did). As differences within their appar-



Using a behavior over time graph, the group came to a sobering conclusion: That if the downward trend of economic self-determination did not correct itself, Guatemalan society risked a resurgence of the violence that had swept the country prior to the civil war in the early 1960s.

ently similar views emerged, the participants debated vigorously, trying to resolve their diverse points of view. It wasn’t until they began to offer up positive goals, however, that their conversations began to converge. Subgroup members quickly came to the realization that what they really cared about was “economic self-determination”; that is, they couldn’t guarantee that an individual wouldn’t deliberately choose to be “poor,” but they could build a society that would enable the individual to have a choice. This conversation was incredibly deep, surfacing and integrating universal concepts of liberty, equality, and solidarity.

Once this goal had been identified, the group assessed past trends using a behavior over time graph. As a result of the meaningful conversations that led up to the goal setting, what emerged next was a rich, rigorous exchange of information. Individuals with responsibilities and expertise from various parts of the system swapped data back and forth, reshaping their perspectives about the behavior of Guatemalan society relative to this issue over time.

The group came to a sobering conclusion (see “Ability to Self-Determine”): That if the downward trend of economic self-determination

did not correct itself, Guatemalan society risked a resurgence of the violence that had swept the country prior to the civil war in the early 1960s. This was a somber moment for the group, one that renewed their sense of urgency. They all knew that they couldn’t let that worst-case scenario happen. So, they debated what had to happen by when in order to ensure that the goal of improving economic self-determination could be achieved. The conversation was short and direct: We must immediately reverse the trend, progressing steadily to a reasonably high level of democracy and real justice over the next 10 years.

The emotional and intellectual energy from this conversation was palpable in the room. Even today, whenever we sense that the process is lagging, all we have to do is flash the group’s graph on the wall again, reawakening their original realization. We anchored and expanded participants’ ability to innovate by having them pair up and develop practices to ensure that they actively internalized both possibilities—the pessimist’s downward trend and the idealist’s upward one—as the dynamic from which creative energy will emerge.

**Organizational Execution.** The compelling nature of the situation

became clearly visible as an unambiguous, uncompromised collective understanding and agreement. But the leaders couldn't yet see, understand, or agree on why and how economic self-determination was continuing to fall, despite their best efforts. To make the roots of these trends visible, we had to take the individual perspectives (the causal maps) of each of the diverse stakeholders and integrate them into a single, inclusive worldview—their own systems map of Guatemalan society ([click here](#)).

This expanded perspective made it clear why and how poverty endured, conflict continued, and adversaries couldn't come to agreement via traditional means. Their system—this “blind, amoral beast” with a lot of momentum—simply reacted “unthinkingly” to inputs to its structure. The conflict wasn't personal (though it felt that way), but structural. This was a significant breakthrough, enabling the leaders to see and understand how they and people they had come to respect through this process somehow generated results that caused harm to others.

What was most significant about this new, more inclusive, and more rigorous perspective was that the partici-

pants began to see how to *act* in the system and how to effect the changes they all believed were necessary. Aided by the analyses we mentioned before (archetypes, trends, matrices, and so on), they extracted a handful of variables from the model that, if they rigorously and systematically changed, could begin to shift the system. When coupled with group members' learnings from the larger map, this understanding and agreement about the need to source each of their projects in the identity of their constituents—those they were most seeking to support—became the basis for robust organizational action.

**Scalability.** Next came the process of deciding where to start this “movement,” how to spread it, and how to enable it to self-direct and then self-sustain. For CARE Guatemala, it started with the group's appreciation of the system as a whole and the actors in it. The organization hosted a series of presentations of their systemic map, inviting other stakeholders to critique their insights. What resulted, even with former foes, were profound conversations whose passionate energies were bounded and channeled by the rigor of the societal systems map. Through these discussions, the participants experienced one another

as thoughtful, committed, caring, and creative individuals struggling to resolve complex problems. Through the larger map and analysis, they found clarity about how to shift their shared system, not with another symptomatic solution, but at the root-cause level.

**Sustainability.** The final hurdle/opportunity to overcome was to ensure the sustainability of the process. Sustainability is a function of the “ecosystem,” whether a biological, social, or environmental ecosystem. In Guatemala, the ecosystem of most immediate concern was the socio-political one. Avoiding “extinction” in such an ecosystem meant understanding the commitments, concerns, and circumstances of the major actors. While much of this knowledge emerged naturally along the way, the group took the time to document and then validate it. Doing so enabled members to (1) enter into relationship with critical stakeholders in the larger system and (2) anticipate, adapt, and avoid solutions that would not survive in the ecosystem over time.

This whole process—from individual relationships to ecosystem sustainability—reflected in “Authentic Stakeholder Collaboration.”

AUTHENTIC STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION			
Creating:	Relationship	Clarity	Ability
At the level of:			
Self	Grounding in your context, experiencing your system, and choosing your role	Internalizing a systemic point of view and taking a personal stand	Leadership
Another	Engaging with others in their passion, their work goal, and a success story, and adding value to them	Creating an individual causal map of their goal, their top 3–5 core competencies, and their story	Trust
Team	Gathering around shared passions, discovering a positive goal, and describing your shared reality	Discovering and assessing your global goal by understanding that goal's behavior over time; mapping the system as a whole	Innovation
Organization	Sharing the work and worldview with the organization and exploring its implications	Analyzing your map to discover your solution set; assessing the organization's fit with reality	Execution
Constituents	Engaging constituents, helping them to shape their identity and define what they seek	Formulating a viral strategy for execution at the constituent level	Scalability
Ecosystem	Giving critical stakeholders a voice, demonstrating your understanding and adding value	Integrating stakeholder goals, needs, and value exchange via a thoughtful, balanced stakeholder assessment	Sustainability

## From Insights to Practice

In addition to their newly established, ongoing dialogue and work with members of the Guatemalan government, other NGOs, and local constituencies, CARE International is working with 12 partnering NGOs to put these insights into practice. This collaboration is working with 28,000 people in 47 communities in the Cuilco Coatan watershed in western Guatemala, helping them rebuild their lives in the wake of the devastation of Hurricane Stan. Others in CARE Central America are seeking to introduce the process into their work as well.

Something meaningful and useful became possible when these leaders in Guatemala successfully integrated the

best of what it means to be human within their work, their relationships, and themselves. They internalized both the intellectual rigor of systems thinking and system dynamics along with the emotional rigor that comes from truly engaging, understanding, and empathizing with one another. In the process, they collectively shifted their perspectives, bringing themselves into greater alignment with their shared reality, and began to act in ways that benefited the whole. What began as something none of them believed was possible has become a new way of perceiving, thinking, and acting in their efforts to cause deep, lasting impact for those they most care about. ■

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*For other papers, books, and presentations on this work and process, go to the Institute for Strategic Clarity library ([www.instituteforstrategicclarity.org/research.htm](http://www.instituteforstrategicclarity.org/research.htm)).*



## VIEWPOINT

# HEAR AND NOW: REFLECTIONS ON A LANGUAGE OF LISTENING

BY BOB STILGER

**S**everal years ago, I was in discussion with Terry, a thirteen-year-old girl, and two other people at the Shambhala Authentic Leadership Institute. I have no memory of what question we were addressing, but Terry brought the story of her own invisibility in her family. She spoke of her deep pain of her parents not knowing who she was and their complete inability to listen to her story, her experience, her yearning.

### TEAM TIP

When someone comes to you with a problem or issue, experiment with not giving them advice but rather giving them listening.

We only had 20 minutes together in conversation. I'm sure I was looking for something wise and pithy to say, but mostly I listened. Sometimes Terry spoke harshly, each word a blunt instrument crashing down. At other times she spoke softly, sharing her inner bewilderment with us. *They won't let me talk. They ignore me. My dad actually put me on a curfew because he didn't believe what I was saying. I just want to get out. Why can't they see who I am? Why do they have to put me inside the little boxes of their own experience?* In front of my eyes, I saw a passionate and courageous warrior emerge from her bewilderment. Mostly, she talked. We listened.

I saw a shift in her, and it didn't come from any advice or proffered wisdom. It came because we listened. For years, I had been looking for new

language. If only we could find the right words, I thought, we could talk about new ideas and frameworks to help us navigate these uncertain times. The experience with this young woman helped me begin to realize that we don't need new words as much as we need new listening. We need a language of listening.

It's not that I don't love words. I do. I savor the way they can slip off a tongue and slide into an ear. I delight in their capacity to bring light into an ominous room. But too often they are used to codify, dominate, and suppress life. Too often they are used as shields to surround our own doubt and as weapons to secure a position of seeming superiority. What are the words and the language that allow us to speak from the depth of our knowing with

the passion of our souls? What is the language that can reach past our pettiness and into our separate and collective greatness?

### Keeping My Mouth Shut

As a social artist, community activist, and sometimes academic, I think I ought to be able to put just about anything into a compelling phrase. I've lived a lot of my life in my mind: having conversations, reflecting on conversations, getting ready for conversations. I've spent countless hours thinking and wondering about experiences. I've always been ready to put ideas into my words. Yet, there are times when I have been most able to share my strongest convictions and deepest feelings by keeping my mouth shut.

At the Berkana Institute, I have an opportunity to work with people from many cultures. We work with a network of leadership learning centers located in Pakistan, India, Greece, Senegal, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, the US, and Canada. We think of this as a *trans*-local network because it is rooted in local experiences and local learning, which are then connected across the globe. As a network, we are learning about the conditions that build resilient communities. We pay attention to new forms of leadership, deep conversation as the basis for all learning and decisions, and the physical work required to grow food, live healthily, and create zero waste.

Many languages are present within this *trans*-local learning community—not just the obvious languages from different cultures, but the less visible languages that have arisen in a world characterized by the use of power *over* rather than the use of power *with*.

A core part of my work is to listen to people in this community into their greatness. I listen as the stories of their personal experience pour forth. Sometimes I ask a question or two, but mostly I listen. Another key aspect of my work is to help people remember what they already know. We all know what it means to be in right relationship with each other and this small planet. We know what it feels like when we receive and give respect. We know what it is like to have courage

and what it is like to be afraid. We know that place where right action springs forth in an instant because of a deep alignment between our heart, spirit, and mind. We know what it is like to be listened to.

Words, of course, continue to be important. I keep searching for those words that will, when spoken, make everything clear. As a sometimes writer, I think that if I put those words on paper, then more people will share my clarity. But I have begun to understand that when I compact experience into words and then compact spoken words even further into writing, the meaning that was clear to me doesn't say the same thing to others. Indeed, my truth can't replace their truth, and my words are often a distant echo or a distraction from what they actually believe. Words of wisdom are, perhaps, better used sparsely.

### Many Languages

When I have a problem or issue that won't go away, I don't usually look to someone who will give me advice. I look for someone who will give me listening. Ten years ago, I organized a healing group when my friend Robert Theobald was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. I thought I was organizing the healing group for Robert, but I soon realized it was for all of us. Robert left us eight years ago, and our healing group continues to meet. For many years, we met once a week for two hours; our time together now is less frequent and goes deeper. Basically, what we do is listen to each other. No fixing. No advising. Just listening.

In this healing group, I cultivated my practice of the language of listening. I begin by reaching inside myself to find my own deep well of curiosity, which I then combine with deep respect for those I'm listening to. Physically and energetically, I create a safe and quiet space where I have no need to judge or categorize the things others say. I remind myself to treasure the silence and the space between the words and to ask people to go deeper and deeper into their story.

I have learned that this practice works in any situation, whether it's a healing group, a conversation with a

thirteen-year-old girl, or a global learning community. But I also know that listening isn't enough. Language is needed to share technical learning—the best way to build composting toilets, make bicycle-powered washing machines, grow plants that nourish health. Concepts are needed for understanding different ways of reflecting and learning. Theories are useful to get a sense of right direction. All of these require words and languages.

Working in a community with many languages present, I am also aware that different meanings are carried in different languages. There is no word in English that holds the depth of *itadakimasu*, the phrase spoken at the beginning of meals in Japan. That one word expresses gratitude to those who grew, harvested, prepared, and served the food as well as to the rain and sun and soil that went into the making. There is no word in English that conveys the depth of *sano* and *insano* in Spanish, meaning whole or healthy and then its opposite.

While all these words are important, the domination of concepts, expressions, and language developed in the white/northern hemisphere must be broken if our lives and world are to be healed. We must let magic and mystery loose again, until more of us remember how to reflect our true experience through dance and song, poetry and painting, mime and sculpture. We must and we will discover new conceptual constructs that help us make sense of our world. Our collective capacity to really listen to each other will allow us to create a world where we are whole, healthy, sacred, and free. ■

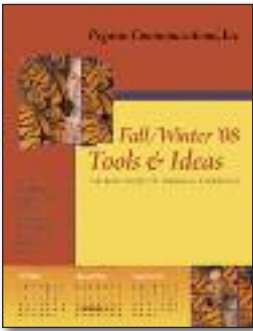
**Bob Stilger** is the co-president of the Berkana Institute and works with initiatives all around the world that are aimed at mobilizing community-based leadership to solve tough problems in areas of food sustainability, eco-building, health, economic development, community, media/the arts, education, and youth leadership.

*This article originally appeared in Ascent 37, Spring 2008 and is reprinted with permission.*



## PEGASUS NOTES

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## FROM THE FIELD

### Rhyming for a Reason, November 18, 2008, Cambridge, MA

Meg Wheatley, Tim Merry and Marc Durkee, Iyeoka Okoawo, the Jeff Robinson Trio, Adam Stone, and Harlym I25 will be featured at the second Berkana Institute “Rhyming for a Reason” event, a celebration of the power of the arts to create social change. Held in José Mateo’s Ballet Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, this evening of original poetry and live music promises to be a fun and spirited way to share stories about resilient communities emerging everywhere. Proceeds from the evening through ticket sales, sponsorship, and a silent auction will benefit the Berkana Institute, a non-profit organization that works in partnership with a rich diversity of people around the world who strengthen their communities by working with the wisdom and wealth already present in their people, traditions, and environment. For more information, go to [www.rhymingforareason.net](http://www.rhymingforareason.net).

### isee systems Presents the 2nd Annual Barry Richmond Scholarship Award

The Barry Richmond Scholarship Award was established in 2007 to honor and continue the legacy of isee’s founder, Barry Richmond. Barry was devoted to helping others become better “systems citizens.” It was his mission to make systems thinking and system dynamics accessible to people in all fields and professions. The award is presented annually at the International System Dynamics Conference to a deserving systems thinking/system dynamics practitioner whose work demonstrates a desire to expand the field or to apply it to current social issues. Applicants are considered based on quality of work as well as financial need.

This year, isee systems presented Navid Ghaffarzadegan, a PhD student and graduate assistant in Public Administration and Policy at State University of New York—Albany, with the \$1,000 cash scholarship that helped fund his trip to the conference in Athens, Greece. Navid’s work applying system dynamics to decision-making and learning was an area of great personal interest to Barry. It provides insights for improving medical decisions, threat assessment, and other key learning problems in our interconnected world.

Applications for the 2009 Barry Richmond Scholarship Award will be available on the [iseesystems \(www.iseesystems.com\)](http://www.iseesystems.com) and System Dynamics Society ([www.systemdynamics.org](http://www.systemdynamics.org)) web sites.

## LEARNING QUOTES

**“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.”**

—Abraham Lincoln

**“When I am getting ready to reason with a man, I spend one-third of my time thinking about myself and what I am going to say and two-thirds about him and what he is going to say.”**

—Abraham Lincoln

**For information about reading and using causal loop diagrams, go to [www.pegasuscom.com/cld.html](http://www.pegasuscom.com/cld.html).**

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# Leap, Dive, and Boogie into Learning



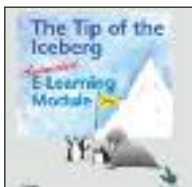
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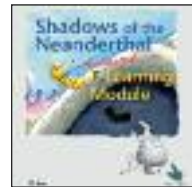
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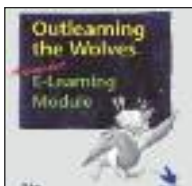
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