


November 2022

Volume 24 Number 4

ISBN 978-1-907549-53-3

 dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-53-3

AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Learning and Leveraging Generative Approaches to Intercultural, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Edited by

Ilene Wasserman, Marlene Ogawa and Tanya Cruz Teller

Co-publishers

**The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry
and Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company**



www.aipractitioner.com/subscriptions 



Sign up for our free AIP eNews 



Sharon Thompson-Tan

Sharon offers executive coaching, experiential programs and consultancy for leadership and organisation development. Sharon is effective in distilling complex situations and data-driven findings into actionable insights. She's well-versed in facilitating lasting systemic changes across multi-cultural, cross-functional organisations inclusively.
Contact: <https://besonder.com/>

Breakdowns and Breakthroughs of Intercultural JEDI Work in a Non-Profit Global Organisation

The author, one of a group of consultants working with a non-profit organisation based in North America in the area of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion found that their breakthrough came when they began to adopt an Appreciative Inquiry approach to the work.

The organisation, based in North America, set out on its justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (JEDI) journey knowing the work is complex, important and urgent. We sourced funding and expertise to support us in accomplishing our mission with JEDI at its core. In our journey, we were confronted with:

- Finding funding and credible people to drive this work amidst their daily obligations,
- Choosing as partners the right consultants, who have a global mindset skilled in organisation and system development,
- Identifying where to begin within the multiple levels of system and multiple polarities that kept us stuck.

Our breakthrough came when we finally began to adopt an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to our JEDI work. Supported by several DEI (diversity, equity and inclusivity) AI coaches and OD consultants, we came together across cultures, work styles, time zones and lived experiences to create the foundational JEDI work for the organisation.

This work is undoubtedly complex, provocative and evocative. You cannot not change yourself while being immersed in it. It transformed me personally and professionally, as an Asian female leader in a global non-profit organisation, a modern elder who had spent three decades in commercial enterprises. If you

It all starts with me.

Beyond the why and the what, pay attention to the how.

Differentiate between appreciate and integrate, the paradox in JEDI work.

ever have this incredible opportunity to lead JEDI work, brace yourself, as the rewards will far exceed your expectations – and be prepared to be transformed.

These are my top three learning points:

1. It all starts with me.
2. Beyond the why and the what, pay attention to the how.
3. Differentiate between appreciate and integrate, the paradox in JEDI work.

1. It all starts with me

As an OD practitioner, I have been involved in major change work at organisational level where I have succeeded at times and failed at others, realising the importance of “use of self”. This experience was particularly significant for me, as I got it in my bones that it had to start with me. While being in flux with multiple challenges weighed down with conflicts within the teams, competing needs of time and attention, I felt diminished. Being new to the non-profit, white-dominated clean energy industry challenged my deeply rooted beliefs as an Asian woman from a Chinese culture who values harmony and respect. My country is formed of migrants from about two generations ago, burdened with unspoken rules to conform and unquestioned respect for your elders.

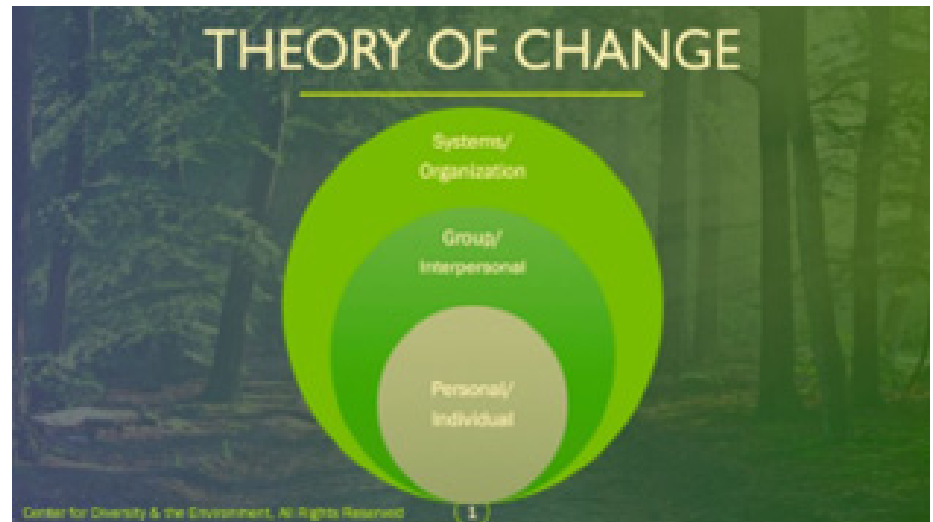
The breakthrough came when I accepted my own subconscious doctrines absorbed from my culture and the country which formed my vision of solo leadership. I was limited by a mental model that a leader must know what to do, and therefore adopted a matriarchal approach: do it my way. I learned that this work is not about making a decision and then telling the organisation what to do using a strategy from the top-down to “roll it out”. This is not about setting objectives and key results imposed from the ivory tower of the management team. Indeed, it is not even to add on to the system some prescribed unbiased training or send out endless questionnaires just to highlight the obvious.

In the [Centre for Diversity and the Environment](#)'s theory of change (see Figure 1), self is at the centre of the system to create the change we want to see.

Acknowledging and accepting who I am gave me the courage to be myself, to listen and to take in what the team is saying and what we have not been attentive to. This was the beginning of recovery, the realisation that the change

must start with me. Who am I? What do I stand for? How am I in service of – or not in service of – the work?

Figure 1: The theory of change



*If you can't fly, then run.
If you can't run, then walk.
If you can't walk, then crawl,
but by all means,
keep moving.*
Martin Luther King

I am thankful to my JEDI coach, Marcelo Bonta of JEDI Heart, who stood with me when it was rough. I felt heard, I felt understood and I felt valued as a fellow change-maker in this work, which can be lonely and depleting. He shared a quote from Martin Luther King Jr about keeping moving forward, and his appreciation for the work I have contributed has inspired me.

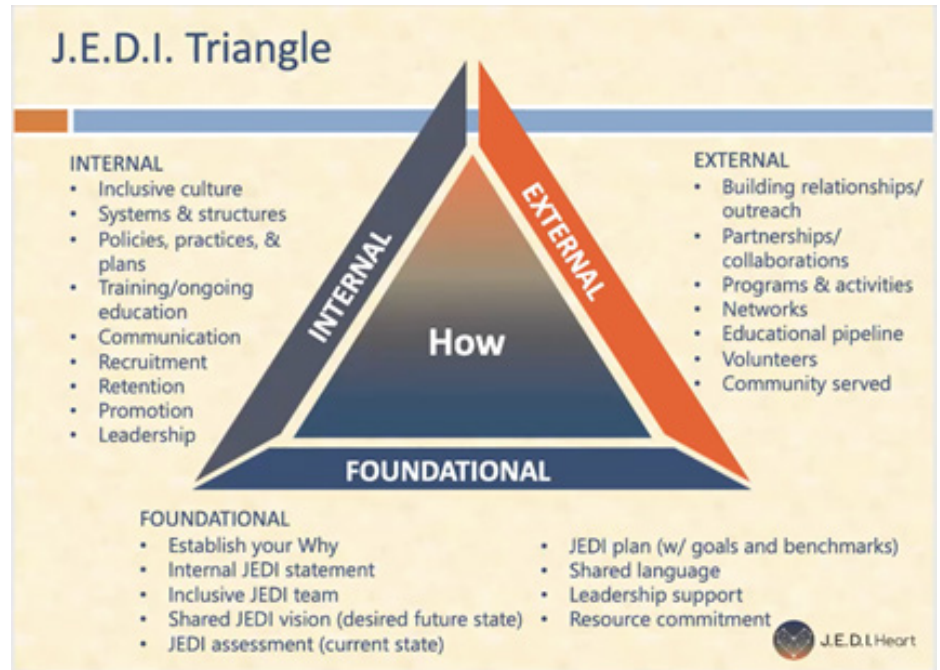
I realise that if I had abandoned the work instead of persisting, I would have missed the opportunity to make a difference for the organisation. His encouragement made me press on and persist.

2. Beyond the why and what, pay attention to the how

Another major learning is around the three facets within the triangle of JEDI work: start with the foundation before embarking on the internal and external works, all the time being mindful of the “how” we do the work.

When we first embarked on the JEDI journey, we struggled with where to begin with our limited resources. We were confronted with the various right things to do, whether it was measuring our diversity at each level of the organisation, or the pay differential, or ensuring that the hiring process was unbiased and equitable. Separately, we were also concerned whether our work was reaching the minorities and marginalised communities. While these were all very important key results to generate, we realised that at its core, we needed to be inclusive in the way we engage internally, making space, and not talking at rather talking with our people.

Figure 2: The JEDI triangle: Start with the foundation before embarking on the internal and external works, all the time being mindful of the 'how' we do the work



Traditionally, management decides what is needed, sets up a strategy, sets up a team and implements the change onto the organisation. While this is needed to generate an outcome, it was very easy to miss being inclusive in the process, the very objective of JEDI. We were at risk of rolling out the strategy and creating a checklist of things to do.

In being accountable for this at management level, I was driven to deliver and compelled to accomplish the activities at the expense of collaboration, glossing over the conflicts and complaints because it was impeding timely completion. I became aware that we had to pause, which was not common practice; it was running against our norm. But when we did, it paid off. We stopped to really listen to the people and incorporated their inputs to make changes in way we went about doing the JEDI work.

If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together.

African proverb

We established a design team by gathering diverse members who volunteered their time and in whatever ways they could contribute without judgement of whether they were experienced in JEDI or the amount of time they were able to contribute. Rather than adopting a project team to implement the decisions, a design team had the opportunity to contribute their ideas and feedback, and to be involved. This was very challenging due to time differences and priorities, and we had to go slow. I was reminded of the African proverb, “if you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together”.

We conducted a survey to find out where we were falling short, benchmarking what needed to be fixed. We did it to find out what is wrong and what is

Asking is one thing, listening is another.

missing. That really sent us down the rabbit hole as we went with a “we need to fix it” mentality. What we learned about the survey process is to keep it simple and listen – I mean really listen. As management, we needed to be humble.

Asking is one thing, listening is another; acknowledging what is being said but responding without a commitment to do things differently will erode people’s confidence. Because in the end, it is about having the heart-to-heart conversations that make the difference.

3. The yin-and-yang paradox

Additionally, we found out that there were multiple, highly complex polarities at play. As we inquired deeper, a fundamental difference was revealed between the individualism of the west versus the collectivism of the east. This yin-and-yang culture made the JEDI work more tenuous. On one hand, it was the calling out culture of the west that made us shy away from taking in the truth, as it was overwhelming. On the other hand, the subservient culture in the east made some seem like we did not have a voice because of the view of maintaining surface harmony. It was fraught with difficulties from the start, as the organisation is headquartered in North America and we started this work right in the middle of George Floyd’s murder and hate crimes targeting the Asian community following the Covid outbreak.

Eventually, it was a listening session that brought the start of reconciliation. It wasn’t only about following the consultants’ approach of diagnosis, analysis, strategic planning and implementation around external and internal DEI measures. It was fundamentally about how we interact, how we pay attention to one another, how we give space and take space to create psychological safety to risk being authentic and be heard. We learned to be patient and accept who we are. Listening allowed our people to exhale and decompress from the tensions built up over a rather long period of conflicts that grew from not paying attention to the needs of the people in the organisation.

By adopting an appreciative rather than a deficiency-based approach, we were able to come together to discuss what the situation was now and what was possible.

By adopting an appreciative rather than a deficiency-based approach, we were able to come together to discuss what the situation was now and what was possible. Members of the organisation created their positive provocative statements of what they would like to see, agreed on the “in” and “out” behaviours as a way of working together. I experienced for the first time what it was like to be living within ubuntu, one of the organisation’s core values. Many understand the definition as “I am because you are”. I believe many of us had a felt experience then. It speaks of the fact that we are all connected and the impact we have on one another. It emphasises the sacredness of being in each other’s presence.

Finally, we invited everyone to attend our JEDI activities without making it mandatory, thus removing the pressure to attend. By not forcing participation, it empowered people with a choice to participate in our JEDI activities. I was pleasantly surprised that many signed up for the various activities and more signed up to be members of the JEDI team at the end of a week dedicated to learning more about JEDI.

This was the beginning of the way we changed, a difference from previously, where we decided at the top and implemented change in a top-down manner. This shift in power was a big step towards internal equity within the layers in the organisation, and it was the beginning of the JEDI movement. This shift was refreshing; it attracted people to participate with a hope to be part of the change they wanted to see.

4. Differentiate to appreciate and integrate

One of the dilemmas we faced was in the selection of external consulting partners to support us in this work. We knew that the work we needed to do in the US, where the organisation was headquartered, would be different from the other countries. We wanted to ensure that we were inclusive and did not impose the US definition of what JEDI should be onto the rest of the world, so that it could stay relevant for all.

We wanted to work with consultants with a global outlook, mindful of various worldviews and those who are not fixated with the prevailing narrative of the US. As such, we wanted to avoid imposing a gold standard of what JEDI should be, written from where the voice was strongest, and then appear to judge where the other member countries involved fell short.

They needed to be able to meet member countries wherever they were on this journey to support them. More importantly, they needed to do so in a way that was appreciative and generative.

I came to understand that the partners we chose to lead and guide us in this work must be skilled in facilitating change from within. They needed to be able to meet member countries wherever they were on this journey to support them in creating greater awareness of areas of injustice, oppression, inequality or a lack of inclusivity. More importantly, they needed to do so in a way that was appreciative and generative. This is at the heart of the work, a dynamic balance of the yin-and-yang paradox of celebrating individuality and appreciating the collective.

Only when we were able to fully acknowledge our differences, appreciating our distinct identities, could we begin to accept one another; that was the beginning of inclusion and the integration to becoming whole, to living in *ubuntu*. This paradox of allowing for individualism paved our way for the collective. Arnold

Beisser's (1970) paradoxical theory of change states that "change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not".

Using an AI approach at group workshops attended by members across the regions, we created a provocative proposition for what we individually and collectively wanted and were proud to see happen in our organisation. We segregated the discussions into two hemispheres of two halves, one of the East and one of the West, and symbolically integrated them to a unified whole. This allowed for the differences in style and time, so that we could meet them where they are. Gratitude to Appreciative Inquiry consultant, David Shaked who supported us in this process.

I learned that the secret sauce is love.

In appreciating the paradox of JEDI work, whether it be the dance between East and West, the individual and the collective, Black and white, feminine and masculine, young and old, rich and poor – yin and yang – I learned that the secret, "juicy" sauce is love, explained as "the ability to accept what is without value judgements. Love is the most powerful force of change"(Carter, 2019).

Concluding comments

Our journey has been exhilarating and, despite being painful at times, it was worth it. The journey that started with an intention to bring about change in the organisation ended with changes individually and personally to people within that organisation. Change starts with the self, when we are aware of who we are and who we are not – then change becomes inevitable. And beyond the need to know the why and the what of JEDI work, the process of how we do the work is profoundly important. Being mindful of the way we go about doing change work will determine the authenticity and credibility of the change team. Finally, at the heart of JEDI work is the art of differentiating and integrating with love and appreciation.

REFERENCES

Beisser, A. (1970) The Paradoxical Theory of Change. In J. Fagan and I. Shepherd, Eds., *Gestalt Therapy Now*, pp. 77-80. Harper & Row.

Carter, J. (2019) *Making a Difference with Your Presence: Use of Self and Self-Mastery*. River Place Press.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)