

## Climbing out of the Muck:

A story about how Diana, Bob, and Phil of Action Design developed as a partnership.

### Preface (from Senge, et al *The Dance of Change*)

The three people who look after one another in this roundtable are all partners in the consulting firm Action Design, scholars of organizational learning, and preeminent practitioners of the skills of inquiry and reflection. They have all been colleagues and friends to *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*; Robert Putnam, for instance, helped us develop the Mental Models section of the book, Phil McArthur contributed one of the most-used segments of that section (“Opening Lines”), and Diana Smith consulted with Peter Senge on the framing of “reflection and inquiry skills” in *The Fifth Discipline*. Here, they describe the hidden dynamics that will emerge in any team of people trying to help one another learn to think and act more effectively.

### The Dialogue

**Robert Putnam (Bob):** The three of us first met in fall 1979, as first-year students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in a course with Chris Argyris. All of us got turned on by the quality of attention and inquiry that Chris demonstrated, and by methods (such as the “left-hand/right-hand column” cases) for reflecting on our thinking and acting. The sessions ended, and we were painfully aware of how far there was to go and how much we wanted to travel farther.

So, along with several other students, we formed a consulting study group. For four years, we met faithfully every two weeks. As in our former class, one of us would write out a conversation that had taken place outside the room. Using the “left-hand column” to reveal the unspoken thoughts people might have had, and their impact on the conversation, we would diagnose the case and role-play various alternative approaches, always with a tape recorder going.

**Philip McArthur (Phil):** As graduate students, we didn’t have the money to pay someone to transcribe our tapes. Our skill as a reflective team came in part from the time we spent listening to the conversation replay, and then writing it down. Doing this is as boring as playing scales on the piano, but perhaps just as necessary to gain proficiency.

**Bob:** After two years, however, the group grew stale. The same arguments and impasses recurred again and again, no matter how hard we tried to avoid them. If we wanted to keep working together, we knew we’d have to raise the ante. We’d have to learn to “get in the muck” of our meetings, and confront one another’s frustrations and misunderstandings in the moment.

We already knew that there was a lot of “muck” to deal with. It was typical, for instance, for Diana to interrupt a person telling a story, and say, “You’ve got to stand up to people more strongly.” Hearing this, I might break in and say, “Diana, you were advocating and not inquiring just now.” And Phil might then tell me, “Bob, you know what? You didn’t inquire with Diana, either.” Around and around we would go, interrupting and misunderstanding, feeling the conversation grow choppy and the tensions escalate throughout the rest of the evening.

Our trusty tape recorder helped save us. We recorded a half-hour segment of ourselves in the muck, and I still have thirty-four pages of my handwritten transcription of that tape. We talked through the transcript and gradually realized that, while in the muck, each of us had a characteristic way of reacting that invariably made things worse.

**Phil:** I was the kind of person who looks for cues that I am making an impact. So I would raise a point, and Bob would sit there, impassively. I would keep making the same point, over and over again, hoping to get a reaction, thinking to myself, “How come he’s not getting my point?” I could not help wondering if Bob was thinking, “Why does Phil keep repeating himself? Why can’t he just get to the point?”

**Bob:** My own ingrained attitude was like a physician’s: “First, do no harm.” When I saw people interrupting and misunderstanding, I wanted to avoid making things worse. So I would hold myself back, and try to make brief interpretive “surgical strikes” to help clarify what I thought Phil or Diana had meant to point out about the other’s misunderstanding. I didn’t realize it, but people thought from my tone of voice that, behind my reserve, I was judging them harshly and critically. People felt dismissed, as if I thought they were “wrong, wrong, wrong.”

**Diana Smith:** The transcript showed that I was also unwittingly following an unarticulated rule: “When others persist, view it as a sign of their uninfluenceability. When I persist, view it as a sign of my integrity.” So if I saw people in trouble, I was drawn to go in and make it right. And I’d stir up the water. I often seemed to end up confronting Bob, coming on strong, like a neutron bomb: “Come on, Bob, intervene! What’s your problem?”

**Phil:** In the heat of the moment, Diana would see Bob’s diffidence as a huge vacuum in the conversation. She would rush in to fill that vacuum, trying to fix the problem, and she would see Bob as not taking responsibility for helping. Meanwhile, Bob would see her as making things worse. I would watch their disagreement turn to open war, feeling overwhelmed myself, and not seeing that I was also contributing to the situation. I gradually realized that I had to get much more involved if I was going to be a constructive bystander.

**Bob:** Over a six-month period, we developed an understanding of the dynamics that kept us in the muck. We realized that each of us was acting out of a sense of integrity and an intention to help. That made a big difference, and helped us to hang in together.

**Diana:** By our fourth or fifth year, in fact, the three of us had started a consulting practice together. But we couldn’t seem to break out of those recurring patterns. We realized that we had to learn to alter the dynamics of our conversation, and change the structure of our relationship, the predictable pattern of interaction. Even when we understood the problem, we still got into nonconstructive, debilitating, seemingly self-defeating arguments. It was like being acrobats on a high wire, knowing in advance that we would fall and crash, and not being able to do anything about it. Dealing with this was much more difficult than any of us expected. Simply as human beings, we had spent all our lives in interpersonal interactions. And then we had studied it, in depth—and we were still having trouble.

We had a breakthrough one evening when Chris Argyris visited. We were working on a case with the kind of client whom Bob often struggled with: an aggressive, loud, and controlling manager. After listening to us, Chris looked very pensive and said, “You know, at one point St. Peter said, ‘On this rock, I’m going to build a church.’ And at some point, you’ve just got to say, ‘On these defenses, I’m going to build a practice.’” In other words, we would never reach a standard of perfection where we could naturally master every situation. We would have to remain in our imperfect personalities and learn from there. This was a very freeing realization for me.

## Following the muck upstream

**Diana:** We continued to bring in people from outside who could help us see our own dynamics. One evening, the systems psychologist David Kantor visited us, and Bob once again presented a case, this time with a difficult team. The line leader droned on and on, and everybody else was silent. Bob couldn't figure out how to shake up the dynamics, and, in a replay of our own habitual muck, I started pressing him to intervene more. I looked at Bob and he had a blank look on his face, almost as if he couldn't understand exactly how to take in what I was saying.

At that moment, David said, "Bob, what does this remind you of?" Bob said something that, to this day, represents the greatest single transformational event in my experience of his relationship with me. He told us a story about being in the third grade, when his father gave him a baseball glove. "It was old and it had no pocket; it was just a flat piece of leather," he said, "but it was my Dad's glove, and I was proud of it. I brought it to school and at the playground a bully came along and said, 'Let me have your glove.'" Bob gave him the glove. The bully started dissing the glove, calling it disgusting and making Bob feel hurt. Then the bully refused to give it back.

So Bob went home to his father and told him what had happened. Rather than taking care of him and trying to help him, his father said, "You go right back to the playground now. You stand up to that guy and you get your glove back."

I had a moment of shock; I recognized that I must be Bob's worst nightmare. In all these times of trying to help my colleague and friend develop, offering my advice to him, I was doing the worst thing I could do to him. I realized that I had to stop asking Bob to be Diana; I had to learn how to help him become a better Bob.

**Bob:** Similarly, I had to learn that when Diana is at her most insistent and seemingly convinced, she's feeling most vulnerable and helpless inside. It doesn't show automatically, at least to me. But I have had to train myself to recognize it. Instead of arching my back and saying "No," objecting to whatever Diana insists upon, there's another move open to me. I can say, "Boy, Diana, you seem stressed. What's going on?"

**Diana:** There was a critical moment after that episode, where we essentially said, "We're in this for the long haul." This was very important. We no longer had to be safe, sweet, kind, or nice. It was like getting married; we knew that no matter how difficult things became, we would keep our commitment to each other's growth.

People sometimes find that level of commitment daunting: "Gosh, is that what it takes?" But in terms of the learning and discovering we did, it was more than worth the price of admission.

We began to really understand and see the structures of human interaction—not just on an intellectual level, but in our bones. We know, for instance, that when Bob and I get into a serious, intense conflict, even Phil is implicated. On one level, Bob represents my father, and I represent the bully in the playground. On another level, it's just the three of us, and Phil has missed his opportunity to help. He could jump in by saying, "Diana is being a bully, but Bob's not seeing the extent to which he's withdrawing in a way that leaves Diana feeling dismissed." This knowledge, that we're all implicated, has been our saving grace.

**Bob:** We've continued these sessions through the present day—a period of eighteen years. The value of this close, intimate learning extends beyond the boundaries of our group. It helps me deal with a number of senior executives, for instance, whose personality profiles are like Diana's. The more we recognize our own habitual limits and barriers, the more effective we seem to become.

You may wonder how this can apply to a project team with a life span of three to six months. There may indeed not be time for the deep work of a self-reflecting team. You may be better off calling in a facilitator who can help you deal with your immediate business impasses.

**Diana:** Even if your team is stable, you may have to deal with new members coming in. We're going through that now, as we incorporate more people into our consulting partnership. How do we help them up the learning curve? How do we develop close relationships with them? And how do we do this without creating a new stuck situation, where the "old-timers" are experts and the "newcomers" are novices?

We only know one way to deal with this: Don't cover it up. Acknowledge the difference in skill, and work on transferring that skill as quickly as possible—in all directions. It's important to recognize the natural inclination to alter your behavior, in front of the newcomers, and to keep the conversation among the old-timers private: "They really don't know us. What will they think?" If you can talk about your conversational issues openly, it sends a very powerful signal to newcomers: "Wow. You guys talk this way? That's really remarkable."

**Phil:** How did we do this for eighteen years? Admittedly, we had a forced structure, beginning with our graduate work and then our mutual consulting practice. And I have a lot of sympathy for people who commute forty-five minutes each way to an evening study group; we never had to do that. Nor did we have kids when we started.

Many teams in business have been together two or more years. If you've met regularly for that long, and have not taken the time to reflect on your results and your competence as a team, then you are probably perpetuating errors. The most critical constraint isn't time, but the willingness, as a group, to talk openly and candidly about your experiences. If you can retain that, then you keep your reason for showing up.