

keynote Prof. Dr. Gervase Bushe
and Prof. Dr. Ronald Fry

GENERATIVE ENGAGEMENT: GOING BEYOND THE POSITIVE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

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Gervase Bushe



Ronald Fry

Saturday morning, two professors took the stage: Ronald Fry - holding a chair in Organisational Behaviour at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, USA - and Gervase Bushe - professor of Leadership and Organisation Development at the Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. The theme of their talk was: Generative Engagement: Going beyond the Positive for Transformational Change.

The topic touched the heartstrings of AI-practice among AI-practitioners. Gervase Bushe admitted that in his early days as an AI-practitioner, he experienced several summits that 'sucked'. A sigh of relief was felt among the audience. A participant stood up and referred to the positivity-thing typically associated with Americans, 'but here in Europe, we sometimes see it as superficial. We prefer to allow other types of experiences into dialogues that enable progress in line with AI.' He received spontaneous applause.

Fry started the conversation by giving examples of people who - after participating in an AI process - volunteered to do something. In his view, this is the most special trait of AI: a successful AI process leaves people committing themselves to unplanned activities, new cooperative action, unleashing energy and turning it to something worthwhile with respect to their common dreams. Throughout the world, this has been the effect of AI. Was it just the positivity? No, not entirely.

Bushe once researched the results of eight organisations, all of them had spent an AI summit in a positive environment. After 18 months the outcomes were quite different. Four of the groups had generated transformational change, two managed to achieve incremental change and two teams had experienced no change at all. One other study, according to Bushe, showed that out of twenty teams, seven cases had transformational outcomes and thirteen incremental change, with no differences in 'positivity' measures. What differed was the creation of new ideas, the emergence of a generative metaphor altering the landscapes of the people involved, and an improvisational approach to the destiny phase in AI.

Positivity may be a necessary condition, but is certainly not sufficient for planned transformational change. The key insight shared by Fry and Bushe is the 'generative connec-

tion. 'It is not just about creating new ideas, brainstorming or dreaming, but doing so in a way that also creates a desire to act upon them!'

The rest of their keynote was about exploring the nature of generativity - specifically the generative connection - its role in transformational change, and how we can infuse Appreciative Inquiry with this generative potential.

For a long time AI practitioners and researchers have focused on leveraging, spotting and appreciating strengths. More and more the inquiry aspect ('the I in AI') is gaining momentum. Generative questions unleash the potential within people. They spark connectivity and bring people to a generative state.

Positivity boosts reciprocity between members of a group. It has a contagious effect and stimulates cooperation and as such is a necessary condition but not an end to itself. The espoused effect is generative connection, interactions that bring feelings of energy, aliveness and potential to create more enduring, expansive and transformational outcomes. Connectedness will then result in 'the development of new and innovative ideas that will generate a better understanding of how inquiries might be even more generative and it might add to our repertoire of thoughts and actions', Fry says. Or in the words of Ken Gergen, already phrased in 1978: 'Evidence of creativity and innovation in conversations; the invention or surfacing of alternative possibilities' and - Fry added - 'a demonstrated capacity, energy or the will to act in harmony with those possibilities in the future'.

In 2007 Gervase Bushe wrote:

'It is the quest for new ideas, images, theories and models that liberate our collective aspirations, alter the social construction of reality and, in the process, make available decisions and actions that were not available or did not occur to us before. When successful, AI generates spontaneous, unsupervised, individual, group and organisational action toward a better future.'

This emphasis on generativity has implications for the 4D process. To what extent can we sustain the generative connection throughout the 4D process and afterward?

Powerful questions

Which questions should we ask to elicit conversations that challenge the status quo? What initial question would lead to the most generativity (most likely evoke a powerful new idea)? Imagine you are organizing a conference, and you use AI to design it. Which question would be most powerful?

1. Tell me about your most positive, high point conference experience. (When you felt happiest, proudest, most inspired, alive, joyful?)
2. Tell me about the most provocative conference experience you had. (When you felt most challenged? - perhaps your thinking was upended, your values were confronted, your ideas were challenged, your emotions were provoked, or your choices were questioned by you).

The audience almost unanimously voted for the provocative question. That one focuses most clearly on an energizing and generative conference experience. And thus it is worthwhile to examine (if you are looking to organize such a meeting).

Imagine what questions can do when they cause people to reframe their reality ('help you rethink what you take for granted'), when they are novel or surprising, when they engage people's hearts and spirit ('just the head is not enough') and when they build and strengthen a relationship while discussing them? Generative questions relate to deep and connecting experiences. These are appreciative, but they are not necessarily positive ones, as we sometimes have to value, acknowledge and embrace the shadowy side of our lives and our mistakes. Questions that fit all of these criteria are not easy to come by. You need to tweak and shape and search for the right words and focus.

Making good use of stories

Another element that is common to almost all AI interventions, is stories. Bushe offers some good advice: 'I more and more like to do 'the storytelling-thing' before the actual summit or AI meeting. We can get more out of the stories, I find, if we let people share them before hand, write them up and then use the stories as a jumping off place for our inquiry into the generative topic.'

A way to make the most of 'Discovery': 'I begin by letting people read the stories in a small group, one at a time. And then brainstorm. What associations and thoughts are triggered?' He stresses that it's not about analyzing them. It is really about using the stories as a spark for new ideas. 'And then the group just keeps on reading until the brainstorm fades out.... In my experience it leads to great results very quickly.'

Dreaming as a first step to action

Fry: 'Dream is to me about creating a mindset of possibilities, about seeing bigger wholes. It works very well to use kinetic experiences. It is common practice among AI practitioners to have people make something, create stuff, use imagery and materials.' He has some very clear-cut advice on how to make the most of such activities. 'Fill the space with imagery. Do not try to order them, or focus on just one, or look for the common thread. Just leave the images as images. Let them be. People also don't need to look at all of them - sometimes it is better only to share stuff in small groups. You do not need an overarching way to organize the images. Our brains can't even handle it.'

The real relevance of these dreams in the shapes of posters, drawings, collages or whatever is the fact that they are made. Fry explains: 'Materializing our imagery is an important step towards taking our intentions into action.'

Generative design: play and embrace the mistakes

In the speaker's view, dream and design do not have clear-cut borders. Fry: 'Generative design is about making visible our highest hopes, dreams as a first signal of intention to act. The important part is that we not talk about actions, or make action plans, but rather build something, design it.' Even if it is only a first prototype. 'The key to an impactful design phase is that people dare to engage. If all went well, you built some trust in the earlier stages. But it still requires a leap of faith. And then, that they engage in play, start trying, dabbling...'

He builds a case for embracing our mistakes: 'I know of a world renowned design company, where the first thing you see if you walk in their headquarters building, is their wall of mistakes. They don't hide them. They are proud of them! They appreciate them. As designers, they embrace mistakes because they were small steps that lead eventually to the successful breakthroughs. We have to find ways to let the mistakes also be here in the practice of AI.'



Destiny: improvise! (not projectize)

A truly generative AI process leaves people knowing where they want to go, and are energized to act. Bushe: "That is what generativity is about. That people start acting, don't wait for permission, but take voluntary, visible action."

"This is why getting the whole system in the room is so important. If you have everyone there you don't need any people to control actions afterwards. You don't need to wait because someone needs to approve plans. You can make decisions on the spot. And start."

The real danger here is to 'projectize' too quickly, Bushe warns. 'If you really want people to do something you need to help them make the first step. Some voluntary, visible step of action. Pay attention and when you see good stuff happening, fan the fire, find ways to amplify the efforts.'

To managers or leaders he always compares their role to that of a farmer: "The seeds have been planted. Now go see what happens. Give fertilizer to the stuff you like, pull out the weeds. Especially in hierarchic organisations people can find that very refreshing."

It's not just an idea. They are backed up by experience and research. 'Our studies have shown that the improvisational approach leads to far greater success. Build it step by step, learn from what happens, include new insights and build sustainable action out of that.'

Enabling conditions for ongoing success

And that basically is the key for the next steps as well. The last question Fry addresses is how to foster ongoing success. Here's some of their tips:

- Get the key decision makers fully engaged in the inquiry. Get the 'right people in the room'. Fry: 'I always try to include more external voices than the client is comfortable with. Get the voices of the client, patient, end-user... in the room. That makes such a big difference. Also: get the people who are financially responsible there...very important, easily overlooked.'
- Strive for stakeholder alignment – not agreement. If you keep the conversation alive, you can work with the differences in opinions and needs.
- Pay attention to how people, who were there, invite new people. As the circle widens: how are new people included? Are they also invited to share their stories and dreams, too?
- Keep the narrative alive.... Create a 'hub' (like a website, newspaper, regular meetings) where new stories can be shared and learnings can be harvested. So that the ongoing improvisations are made visible. Start follow-up meetings with stories and experiences (to avoid falling into 'regular meeting mode').

Generative keynote

Time was up. But the ideas are not! Fry and Bushe themselves stress that these are not the 'definite' answers, and invite everyone to keep exploring and experimenting: 'how do we make AI as generative as possible?'

'Beyond positivity' was well received by the audience. They got a long and enthusiastic applause.

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Video presentation Fry and Bushe ▶