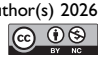
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*Essays and Dialogues*

# Whole-System Development: The Capacity to Act Together

The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science
1–13
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DOI: 10.1177/00218863261460939
journals.sagepub.com/home/jab


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## Abstract

Whole-System Development focuses on how systems build the capacity to act together on complex challenges. Drawing on open systems thinking and decades of practice, this paper introduces Differentiation/Integration (D/I) as the developmental logic through which systems increase their capacity to learn and act. While many approaches emphasize dialog, alignment, or individual change, this work highlights how the system is brought together, who is present, and what they do. When the relevant parts of a system engage directly, differences become visible and workable rather than divisive. Through the interplay of differentiation and integration, systems can hold multiple perspectives, recognize shared realities, and take coordinated action without requiring agreement. Cases drawn from Future Search practice in business, post-conflict settings, and community development show how this capacity emerges. The paper positions Whole-System Development as a contribution to applied behavioral science and a basis for further inquiry and practice.

## Keywords

change leadership, dialogic OD, global strategy, groups/group processes/dynamics, leadership, organizational change, organizational culture and climate, organizational development, organizational transformation, strategic decision-making

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Most leaders, when facing complex problems, bring in expertise. They commission analyses, engage consultants, develop strategies, and present plans. This is not wrong. Expert-driven change can produce rigorous diagnosis, clear direction, and in stable conditions, real progress.

We have also known for some time that expert-driven change has a structural limitation. Decisions developed outside the system are rarely implemented successfully because they are not owned by the people expected to carry them forward (Lewin, 1948). This recognition gradually shifted practice away from experts solving problems on behalf of organizations toward broader participation in improving the systems people are part of (Weisbord, 2012). Large-group methods, stakeholder engagement, and skilled facilitation have become increasingly common responses to complex challenges (Bartunek, 2022).

Yet participation alone is not enough. The difficulty is not simply getting more people into the room. The deeper challenge emerges when the system begins to face itself with its many differences in role, responsibility, experience, interest, and perspective.

This becomes most visible in the kinds of challenges systems face today, such as sustainability, healthcare, community decline, addiction, child hunger, and economic development. These are problems no one part of a system can solve alone. They require people with different realities and responsibilities to act together, often before agreement exists.

And acting together across real differences is hard. When differences surface, people retreat to familiar positions, defend partial truths, blame other parts of the system, or move too quickly toward agreement in order to reduce tension. Difficult conversations become adversarial or are avoided altogether. When these familiar patterns happen, systems lose access to the very differences they need in order to learn, adapt, and coordinate action.

The obstacle is not the differences people hold. Differences are a system's most valuable source of information and the raw material for learning and development. The obstacle is the absence of conditions that allow those differences to be brought forward, understood, and worked with. When those conditions are missing, fragmentation deepens, perspectives harden into opposition, and systems lose the capacity to see their shared situation clearly.

What is needed are the conditions under which people build capacity to stay engaged with difference long enough to recognize the larger reality of which they are a part and act from it.

This paper introduces Whole-System Development as an approach to creating those conditions.

## Whole-System Development: A Differentiation/Integration Theory of Change

Whole-System Development is grounded in a developmental theory of change: systems build increased capacity through the ongoing interplay of differentiation and

integration. In this paper , development refers to a system increasing its capacity to address challenges it could not resolve before.

Differentiation means surfacing the differences that matter, differences of role, perspective, identity, and experience.

Integration means working with those differences without collapsing them. It does not require agreement. Differences do not need to disappear or resolve. The system learns to hold what cannot be agreed on and act on what it discovers it shares.

The tension between differentiation and integration is the main story here. Tension is the source of development. When systems avoid it, they default to familiar patterns. When they can stay with it, people begin to see beyond their own position and experience connections they could not see alone.

This points to a structural rather than behavioral theory of change. Whole-System Development is not primarily concerned with changing individual attitudes, motivations, personalities, or skills. Development occurs as systems learn to work with what people already know, value, have lived, and want. The shift happens when people begin to see the larger reality they share and their relationship to it.

As a system develops this capacity, the people within it change as well. I call this *systems experiencing*: a shared encounter with complexity and uncertainty that produces clarity, grounded hope, and the conditions for coordinated action (Janoff, 2022).

## Intellectual Foundations of Whole-System Development

The intellectual roots of Whole-System Development lie in two converging traditions: open systems thinking and differentiation/integration theory.

Open systems thinking says that any living system, whether a community, an institution, or a society, is embedded in and shaped by its larger environment. From this perspective, a system develops in relation to its environment, not in isolation from it. Building on that foundation, we understand that a system unable to read and respond to what surrounds it, loses the capacity to adapt (Ackoff, 1974; Meadows, 2008; Senge, 1990; Trist & Emery, 1965; von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Differentiation/integration theory has roots in biology, organizational theory, and developmental psychology. Across these fields the core insight is the same, development is a qualitative shift in how a system organizes itself and increases its capacity to take in more of its internal and external reality and work with it.

Werner (1957) established that development moves from relative globality, undifferentiated wholeness, toward states where parts become more distinct and then more fully integrated. This is not simply growth. It is reorganization. We see it in all living systems. We start life as a single cell that differentiates into specialized functions, a thinking brain, a beating heart, a digestive system, each with its own structure and purpose, held together as a functioning whole. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) found the same pattern in organizations. Effective companies created integrating mechanisms that could hold the real differences between functions like Operations, Finance, and

Sales. Less successful ones avoided those differences, either blurring boundaries or hardening them into silos.

In task-focused groups, this kind of functional differentiation does not arise naturally. It has to be created. Drawing on Solomon Asch's research on perception and group pressure (Asch, 1952), Fred Emery formulated conditions for effective dialogue that support people in exploring a shared reality rather than defending isolated positions. "When participants explore the same world, using concrete examples, and experience how these conditions affect them, a 'shared psychological field' can emerge. What looked like 'my reality' versus 'your reality' begins to be understood as part of a larger 'shared reality'" (Weisbord, 1992, p. 21).

Working with differences in groups also requires that people be able to speak without fear of isolation or scapegoating. Agazarian's System-Centered Group Psychotherapy addresses this directly through practices like subgrouping, which allow differences to be explored in ways that avoid polarizing the group or scapegoating the individuals (Agazarian & Janoff, 1993).

These traditions converge on a common insight: you cannot integrate what you have not yet differentiated.

My contribution is to make visible the process through which a system comes to see itself as a whole system, in context, so it can deepen its understanding of the forces shaping it, build the capacity to respond, and take action that will, in turn, influence its environment.

This raises a practical question: what conditions ensure that development can happen consistently, and across different contexts?

Whole-System Development answers this with four integrated design principles. They are not techniques. They are the structural conditions for real system-level learning and committed action.

## Four Integrated Design Principles of Whole-System Development

Over many years of work with my long-time colleague Marvin Weisbord, we were inspired and influenced by pioneers of organizational change (Lippitt, 1998; Schindler-Rainman & Lippitt, 1980; Trist & Emery, 1965). We operationalized four design principles under which differentiation and integration could occur in practice for any task-focused system change process (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010).

Together the principles answer two questions: *who* needs to be in the room, and *what* people do when they are there.

**Bring the "whole system" into the room.** This means convening those with authority, resources, expertise, information, and lived experience so the system can differentiate and work with the realities that matter.

**Explore the whole before acting on parts.** Rather than rushing to solutions, together they build a shared picture of the larger forces shaping the system and how

the different parts of the system are responding to those forces. This is collective sense-making from within, an incredible opportunity for deeper system learning.

**Focus on the future and discover common ground.** Rather than centering on problems or conflicts, participants imagine a preferred future that integrates their perspectives and experiences. This forward orientation is where common ground emerges. It is not imposed, but discovered. Differences that remain are held, without requiring resolution, alongside emerging areas of shared intention that can guide action.

**Support self-management.** Participants take responsibility for the work of the meeting rather than deferring to a facilitator or authority to determine outcomes.

Applying these principles enables systems to build capacity for reorganizing structures, relationships, and processes in response to changing realities. People can also experience the resilience needed to stay in uncertainty long enough to discover what can be shared and acted on. This is development.

## Introduction to the Cases: Future Search as an Expression of Whole-System Development

Marv Weisbord and I co-developed Future Search over many years of practice as one expression of these principles. Often categorized as a large-group intervention (Bunker & Alban, 2006), it is better understood as a structured process and container through which systems learn about themselves and build the capacity to act together.

Future Search begins in the planning process, where planners differentiate the system into the stakeholder perspectives necessary for the task. In the meeting, participants work through five tasks: explore their shared past in mixed groups, examine present realities from their differentiated stakeholder perspectives, imagine integrated preferred futures in mixed groups, search for common ground in the whole group, and organize action (Janoff & Weisbord, 2004).

The three cases that follow show how these dynamics unfold under conditions of real complexity. Across three settings, a global business, a post-conflict nation-building effort, and an urban regeneration process, participants begin with differences that reflect genuinely competing realities and interests, the kind that ordinary managerial processes struggle to hold.

In each case, shifts occur as previously unspoken realities are brought forward and worked with. The case studies show how the emergence of shared understanding and capacity for coordinated action do not rely on full agreement or resolution of differences. They illustrate what integration makes possible and what it does not guarantee, revealing the conditions under which systems can act together, dismantle old barriers, and begin to shape their own future. The cases draw on the author's experience as a consultant and on interviews with key participants and sponsors involved in these efforts.

## IKEA: From Competing Demands to Shared Responsibility

When IKEA decided to become a global leader in sustainability, it faced demands that could not be reconciled through ordinary managerial reasoning. The company was

under pressure to reduce environmental impact, maintain affordability, ensure profitability, and respond to external stakeholders with differing and often conflicting priorities. Considered separately, each demand was legitimate. Taken together, they were incompatible.

Rather than developing a strategy internally, IKEA convened a Future Search, bringing together leaders from across its global functions alongside external partners including the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace International, UNICEF, Oxfam, and representatives from the European Union. The task was to explore what a sustainable future would require of the system, meaning, how a global home-furnishing company could operate sustainably across its products, supply chains, and markets.

As participants worked through their shared past and present realities, the differences sharpened. External partners pressed for environmental standards that, implemented independently, would have made IKEA's business model unworkable. Internal leaders focused on cost structures, supply chains, and customer expectations that could not easily absorb those demands. The group was not aligned around a common problem. It was operating from distinct and competing logics.

A turning point came when an external participant posed a question that reframed the conversation: *If IKEA furnished the homes of all the people on Earth the way it does today, would there be any resources left?* As the implications settled, NGO representatives began to recognize that their separate requirements, taken together, made it impossible for the company to meet any of them. Josephine Rydberg-Dumont, head of IKEA's design, production, and distribution arm, described what followed as a "golden moment": "It made a difference to us that they understood that if we would make one happy, we could be making another one unhappy." The shift was captured directly by another participant: "We want you to be successful. It is your responsibility to be both profitable and sustainable."

Profitability, affordability, and sustainability were no longer framed as competing goals to be traded off. They had become interdependent responsibilities that had to be worked with together.

From this, a shared agenda emerged. IKEA and its partners committed to tracking the environmental impact of every product and embedding sustainability across management groups, core processes, and functions, including circular design, climate-positive operations, and the use of renewable and recycled materials. Sustainability moved from a specialized concern to a core dimension of how the business would operate.

This integration did not dissolve the underlying tensions. Different parts of the business move at different speeds. Tradeoffs between cost, design, sourcing, and environmental impact continue to surface. But the system had moved from fragmented demands to a shared understanding of its responsibilities, and the capacity to work with the tensions rather than around them.

As Rydberg-Dumont later reflected: "Once people experienced the larger system together, learning itself became a structural necessity, a core business requirement, not an optional activity."

## South Sudan: Acting Together in the Midst of Fragmentation

In South Sudan, during a 17-year civil war, efforts to support children were deeply fragmented. International agencies, government actors, tribal leaders, and communities operated with different priorities and little coordination. Children were among the most affected, orphaned, displaced, and often forced into military service. Previous efforts to demobilize child soldiers had produced only limited results. Children were released in small numbers, only to be reconscripted.

Sharad Sapra, then director of UNICEF's Operation Lifeline Sudan, sought a different approach. His question was not how to resolve the broader conflict, but whether it was possible to create a future for the country's children. "I can't do anything about peace in the region, but I can do something for the children."

Two linked Future Searches were convened. The first brought together forty young people, aged twelve to eighteen, representing multiple tribes. Many had lived their entire lives in a war zone. They spoke of loss, separation from families, and the absence of schools and health care. They also shared a dream: to live safely, be educated, and have a future without war. Ten of these young people then joined a second conference with adults, UN leaders, tribal chiefs, village women, expatriate Sudanese business people, aid workers, and funders.

As participants explored their shared past and present, entrenched conflicts resurfaced. Disputes over land use issues and oil rights reappeared in the room. Participants took sides, and the risk of fragmentation was real. At this point I intervened, not to resolve the disputes, but to name the task and offer a choice, and for me, it was a real choice for them to make: "You can keep talking these issues that cannot be resolved here, or you can focus on the children, and we have the people here in the room who can do something for the children."

After a long pause, one of the chiefs responded: "We must work for the children."

What made this possible was that the children were in the room. Also we had the diversity of the system, those inside and those outside the system. Their presence confronted the adults with a reality they could not deny: the children had no future unless the adults chose to act. Participants did not abandon their positions, but those positions no longer defined the work we were doing in that meeting. As Sapra described it: "Instead of saying what others should be doing for us, they started saying what I'm going to contribute to make something for the children possible."

Common ground emerged around concrete action, building schools, bringing in curriculum materials, training farmers, mobilizing health-care workers. Progress was uneven and security conditions remained extremely difficult, but the group had a mandate, and with it the ability to secure resources from donors, sustain alignment with Sudanese expatriates, and recruit teachers and local health workers.

With children still at the center of his work, Sapra later sponsored a Future Search specifically focused on the demobilization of child soldiers, convening tribal chiefs, military commanders, teachers, parents, civil society actors, and young people in Rumbek, South Sudan. For the first time, those responsible for recruitment and those

affected by it were in the same room, facing their mutual responsibility. The outcome was not only the release of children, but the establishment of conditions intended to prevent reconscription. As Sapra recounted: "The army actually took responsibility and said, 'We will make sure. We understand this. We will demobilize them and put in a system so that these kids don't come back.'"

In the first phase, more than 3,500 children were demobilized. Over time, larger numbers returned to civilian life. These outcomes must be understood in context: everything continued to operate within a volatile, conflict-affected environment, and sustaining the changes required ongoing effort. What the process made possible was not the resolution of conflict, but the capacity to act in its presence.

Years later, as UNICEF Regional Director in Uganda, Sapra applied the same principles to end the abuse of children in schools. The ripple matters because a leader who had learned to work with an entrenched system carried that capacity into a new context. Future Searches were run at the local, regional, and school level, with review meetings in between and children present throughout. As of this writing, the work is not finished. Not every child receives appropriate discipline rather than physical punishment. But it has made a real difference for adults and children alike, and continues to (Janoff, 2016; UNICEF program reports).

## Derry/Londonderry: Acting Together Without Resolving Division

In Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland's second-largest city, decades of political violence had left deep and enduring divisions between Catholic and Protestant communities. Years of economic decline fractured the city across class, geography, and relationships between the public and private sectors. It had come to see itself as a place of dysfunction and despair. And yet, there were pockets of creativity and civic energy emerging through arts and culture. Although the 1998 Good Friday Agreement created the possibility of peace, efforts to regenerate the city repeatedly stalled. Cynicism about development plans was widespread and the scale seemed overwhelming. The challenge was not simply to develop a strategy, but to bring together a city that did not yet experience itself as a whole.

In February 2009, 120 participants representing community groups, business leaders, government agencies, civic organizations, residents, young people, and both sides of the political divide gathered in one room. The task was to imagine and take responsibility for the city's economic and social regeneration.

As participants explored their shared history and present realities, the tensions that had shaped the city were still present. Political identities remained strong, and divisions ran deep. These divisions were rooted in competing histories, senses of belonging, and claims to legitimacy. The name of the city itself captured this: Derry to those with an Irish identity, Londonderry to Unionists. The risk of the meeting fragmenting along

these lines was real, and there was no guarantee participants would move beyond their fixed positions.

Yet as the work unfolded, something shifted. Participants began to recognize a larger picture and areas of shared concern that cut across the divisions. Education, skills development, jobs, infrastructure, and creating a welcoming city for residents and visitors emerged as common priorities. Even longstanding points of contention began to recede. As Martin McGuinness, Deputy First Minister, later observed: "Some call it Derry, some call it Londonderry, but we all call it home."

This shift did not resolve the underlying political differences. It made it possible to act in their presence. Participants did not need to agree on identity or history in order to take responsibility for the city's future. For the first time, key leaders across sectors and across the political spectrum identified common ground and committed to working together.

A coordinated effort began to take shape. The Future Search generated 12 working groups and became the foundation for the city's regeneration plan. Within months, hundreds of people were involved in the implementation. Within 18 months, more than a thousand participants were collaborating across traditional divisions. A shared framework, "The One Plan," provided direction where previously there had been competing initiatives (Mountford et al., 2012).

Trust remained fragile and relationships were not transformed overnight. Collaboration required ongoing effort, and progress depended on sustained leadership and the willingness of participants to keep working together despite differences. As Aideen McGinley, CEO of Ilex (former regeneration company) noted, "the process demanded courage. Leaders had to act without certainty about the outcome, trusting that the system could find its way forward." Sustained change came not from a single meeting but from repeatedly building this capacity through ongoing review meetings that kept the work alive.

The outcomes reflected this. The city took on the Peace Bridge, physically connecting the Catholic community with the Protestant community across the River Foyle. Derry became the United Kingdom's first City of Culture, the first time the designation had ever been awarded. These developments did not signal the end of division. They demonstrated what becomes possible when a system can face itself and act together without requiring agreement on everything (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010).

## Patterns Across Cases: Differentiation and Integration Under Constraint

Although the three cases differ widely in context, they reveal a common developmental pattern. In each setting, the right people for the task, carrying diverse responsibilities for their shared future, came together through a Future Search. Differences that initially appeared as incompatible demands or entrenched conflicts became sources of information about what was actually happening. And in each case, that information made coordinated action possible.

The cases also reveal something more significant than confirmation of the model. The same developmental logic operates under very different conditions, and those conditions shape what differentiation and integration can and cannot accomplish.

In IKEA, the system was intact but facing competing and incompatible demands. Commercial, environmental, and social expectations could not be reconciled through traditional decision-making. Differentiation made visible the limits of each perspective when held in isolation. Integration did not eliminate the tensions, but it enabled participants to take shared responsibility for working through them. The outcome was not resolution but a reframing of the system's work as an ongoing effort to hold interdependent demands together.

In South Sudan, the context was one of active conflict and systemic breakdown. Authority was fragmented, and previous efforts had failed to produce lasting change. Integration did not stabilize the broader context, but it made it possible for participants to act together in specific domains, particularly in relation to the children. The outcome was not continuity or control, but the emergence of coordinated action under ongoing conditions of uncertainty and instability.

In Derry/Londonderry, the system was constrained by enduring political and identity-based divisions. Repeated attempts to develop a unified regeneration plan had failed. Differentiation brought these divisions into the room without requiring their resolution. Integration enabled participants to identify and act on shared priorities without agreement on identity or history. Before the meeting, Sir Roy McNulty, Ilex Chair, had framed the challenge precisely: "The key here is not so much another vision and plan, but a vision and plan which have sufficient buy-in across the community." That is what emerged, one plan, with enough buy-in from citizens across the city.

Taken together, these cases suggest that the power of differentiation and integration does not lie in producing agreement or eliminating conflict. It lies in enabling systems to act under constraint. Different contexts impose different limits. In some cases, integration allows competing demands to be held and worked with. In others, it makes coordinated action possible in the absence of stable structures. In still others, it enables action without full trust but with the grounded possibility that trust can grow.

This shifts the understanding of what development means. Development is not movement toward coherence through resolution, improved skills, or better communication. It is the increasing capacity of a system to remain engaged with difference and to act in relation to a shared reality, even when that reality includes tension, instability, or division. The design principles determine who is involved and what they do together: get the right people in the room for the task and create the conditions for them to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity they face before they act. You cannot integrate what has not yet been differentiated. When those conditions are in place, what becomes possible is not just a plan. It is grounded hope and real action.

## Whole-System Development: Toward a Field of Practice and Inquiry

Whole-System Development resonates strongly with Dialogic Organization Development (Bushe & Marshak, 2009), which has made a significant contribution by shifting attention from diagnosing and problem-solving toward meaning-making

and generative dialog. Dialogic OD has illuminated how new shared realities emerge through conversation and how change occurs not only through plans or analysis, but through shifts in how people make sense of their situation together.

Whole-System Development shares this recognition and adds a complementary structural dimension. Where Dialogic OD emphasizes how meaning shifts through conversation, Whole-System Development gives equal attention to how the system is constituted, who is present, what differences they carry, and whether the relevant parts of the system are actually in the room. This becomes critical when systems face complex, high-stakes differences that conversation alone cannot hold. The quality of dialogue and the design principles that structure the meeting are not separate concerns. Together they determine whether a system can experience itself as a whole, remain intact under pressure, and stay on task.

Future Search is one disciplined architecture for making this possible. Its effectiveness across diverse settings lies in translating the underlying principles and developmental logic into a form that many can learn and use (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007). The larger contribution, however, is not the method itself. It is the recognition that systems build capacity when differentiation and integration are intentionally enabled and that meetings can be designed to support that process (Weisbord & Janoff, 2015)

## Conclusion: Toward Wholeness

In this paper, I have argued that participation, dialog, and facilitation, while necessary, are not sufficient to build a system's capacity to act together. What matters are the conditions under which people can experience themselves as part of a larger whole, bring forward realities that are usually kept separate, and discover what they can do together in the face of complexity and difference.

The three cases show this under very different constraints. At IKEA, commercial and ethical demands had to be held together without eliminating the tradeoffs between them. In South Sudan, coordinated action became possible under conditions of violence and instability. In Derry/Londonderry, people acted together on regeneration without resolving the identity-based divisions that had shaped the city for generations.

These lessons matter now more than ever. They are not abstractions. We live in a moment when differences are hardening into polarization, and the damage is visible across societies, institutions, and communities. At the same time, differences are often smoothed in the name of efficiency, harmony, or progress, and the cost of that is equally real. When everything is forced into agreement, systems lose access to the information they need to learn. When nothing changes for the better, people lose hope.

The deeper difficulty is that we are wary of difference. We seek similarity. We judge quickly and move toward what feels familiar. We enter situations with understandable skepticism and often leave without fully testing our assumptions. These habits do not always cause harm, but they do separate us and make it harder to discover what we share and what we can do together.

Sharad Sapra, reflecting on the work in South Sudan, observed that what Future Search made possible was not fundamentally new. He observed that tribal leaders in Uganda have made decisions for generations by bringing all people together, talking things through, understanding where each person is coming from, and discovering what could be agreed on, even when differences remained. He said "it is not that modern systems should become tribes. It is that the human capacity to learn together in the face of difference is older and more deeply rooted than most contemporary institutions allow" (Sapra, in conversation). Much of modern organizational and political life has lost the conditions that make this possible. The work is to create them again.

This is why a movement toward wholeness is not sentimental. Whole-System Development is practical and disciplined. It asks the people needed for the task to stay in the room long enough to see more of the world they share. It asks them to act from what they can agree on, while continuing to hold what they cannot. It asks systems to develop the capacity to remain whole in the presence of difference.

That is not a simple ask. But it is a learnable one, and a necessary one.

As Marv Weisbord often reminded us: "The world is a bottomless pit of needs. So we have to do something now."

Perhaps one of the most consequential things we can do is create the conditions in which people can face what divides them without giving up on each other, discover what they share, and act together from there.

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## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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