

# **An Introduction To Invitational Theory**

William Watson Purkey

*University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

A number of scholars and researchers have worked together over the past decade to develop an understanding of certain abstract principles and everyday facts that appear to relate to one another and which seem to influence human success or failure. This understanding has evolved into a model of practice called "invitational theory." The term "invitational" was chosen for its special meaning. The English invite is probably a derivative of the Latin word *invitare*, which means to offer something beneficial for consideration. Translated literally, *invitare* means to summon cordially, not to shun. Implicit in this definition is that inviting is an ethical process involving continuous interactions among and between human beings.

Invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1984, 1988; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987, 1990; Purkey & Stanley, 1991) is a collection of assumptions that seek to explain phenomena and provide a means of intentionally summoning people to realize their relatively boundless potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor. Its purpose is to address the entire global nature of human existence and opportunity, and to make life a more exciting, satisfying and enriching experience. Invitational theory is unlike any other system reported in the professional literature in that it provides an overarching framework for a variety of programs, policies, places and processes that fit with its basic components.

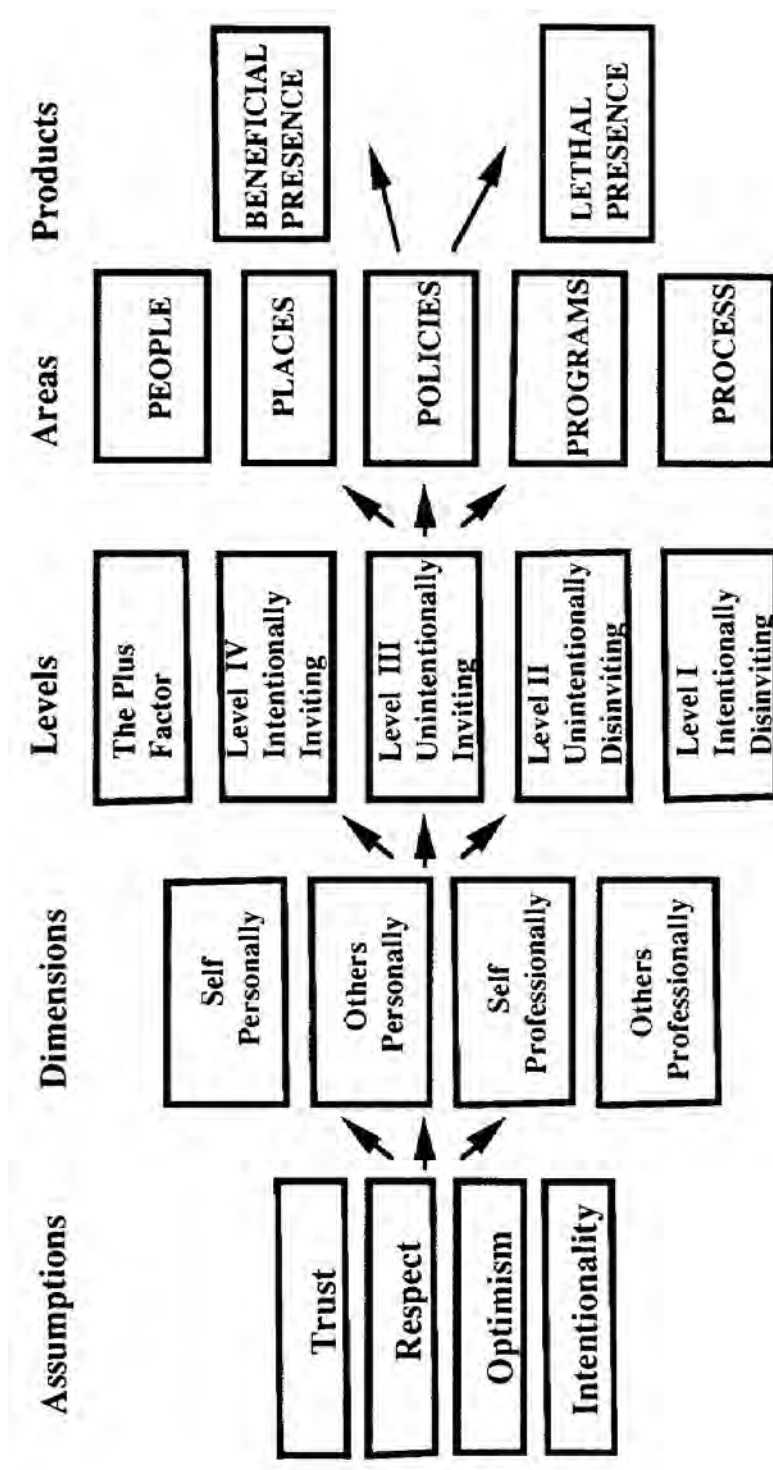
Figure 1 illustrates the major components of invitational theory. It will be helpful to keep this figure in mind as the foundations, assumptions, areas, levels, and dimensions of invitational theory are explained.

## **Foundations of Invitational Theory**

Invitational theory is based on two successive foundations: The perceptual tradition and self-concept theory. These two foundations, each supported by decades of scholarly research and writing, provide invitational theory with substance and structure. Figure 2 illustrates these foundations.

### **The Perceptual Tradition**

In applying invitational theory, a most important question is "What is the fit among perceptions of various individuals?" The perceptual tradition maintains that human behavior is the product of the unique ways that individuals view the world.



**Figure 1**  
Invitational Theory and Practice



**Figure 2**  
**The Foundations of Invitational Theory**

The perceptual viewpoint places consciousness at the center of personality. It proposes that people are not influenced by events so much as their perception of events. The perceptual tradition was beautifully presented in the 1962 Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming*, edited by A. W. Combs.

### **Self-Concept Theory**

A second important question in applying invitational theory is "Who am I and how do I fit in the world?" This question derives from the second foundation of invitational theory: self-concept theory. Self-concept is a complex and dynamic system of learned beliefs that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence. The theory maintains that behavior is mediated by the ways an individual views oneself, and that these views serve as both antecedent and consequence of human activity. Self-concept theory was developed by Jourard (1968), Rogers (1969), Purkey (1970) and many others.

Invitational theory offers a logical extension to the perceptual tradition and self-concept theory and builds on these two foundations. These foundations, supported by a vast research literature, provide a humanistic, person-centered rationale for the four basic assumptions of invitational theory.

## **Assumptions**

Invitational theory is unlike any other system reported in the professional literature in that it provides an overarching framework for a variety of approaches and models that fit with its four basic assumptions. These assumptions give it purpose and direction and take the form of four propositions: trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality.

### **Trust**

Human existence is a cooperative activity where process is as important as product. A basic ingredient of invitational theory is a recognition of the interdependence of human beings. Attempting to get others to do what is wanted without involving them in the process is a lost cause. Each individual is the highest authority on his or her personal existence. Given an optimally inviting environment, each person will find his or her own best ways of being and becoming.

### **Respect**

People are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly. An indispensable element in any human encounter is shared responsibility based on mutual respect. This respect is manifested in the caring and appropriate behaviors exhibited by people as well as the places, policies, programs, and processes they create and maintain. It is also manifested by establishing positions of equality and shared power.

### **Optimism**

People possess untapped potential in all areas of human endeavor. The uniqueness of human beings is that no clear limits to potential have been discovered. Invitational theory could not be seriously considered if optimism regarding human potential did not exist. It is not enough to be inviting; it is critical to be optimistic about the process. No one can choose a beneficial direction in life without hope that change for the better is possible. From the standpoint of invitational theory, seeing people as possessing untapped potential determines the policies established, the programs supported, the processes encouraged, the physical environments created, and the relationships established and maintained.

### **Intentionality**

Human potential can best be realized by places, policies, processes, and programs specifically designed to invite development and by people who are

personally and professionally inviting with themselves and others. An invitation is defined as an intentional act designed to offer something beneficial for consideration. Intentionality enables people to create and maintain total environments that consistently and dependably invite the realization of human potential. Intentionality is so important in invitational theory that it receives special attention later in this paper.

The four essential propositions of invitational theory: trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality, offer a consistent "stance" through which human beings can create and maintain an optimally inviting environment. While there are other elements that contribute to invitational theory, these propositions are key ingredients.

## **Five Areas**

Invitational theory focuses on five areas that exist in practically every environment and that contribute to the success or failure of each individual. In the same way as everyone and everything in hospitals should invite health, so everyone and everything in every setting should democratically and ethically invite the realization of human potential. This involves the people, places, policies, programs and processes. These five "Ps" make up the ecosystem in which individuals continuously interact.

### **People**

While everything in life adds to or detracts from success or failure, nothing is more important in life than people. It is the people who create a respectful, optimistic, trusting and intentional society.

### **Places**

The physical environment offers a starting point for moving from invitational theory into practice, because places are so visible. Almost anyone can recognize smelly restrooms, cluttered offices, peeling paint, or unkempt buildings. Fortunately, places are the easiest to change because they are the most visible element in any environment. They also offer the opportunity for immediate improvement.

### **Policies**

Policies refer to the procedures, codes, rules, written or unwritten, used to regulate the ongoing functions of individuals and organizations. Ultimately, the policies created and maintained communicate a strong message regarding the value, ability, and responsibility of people.

## **Programs**

Programs have an important part to play in implementing Invitational theory because programs often focus on narrow objectives that neglect the wider scope of human needs. For example, special programs that label people can give individuals ideas about themselves that negate the positive purposes for which these programs were originally created. Invitational theory requires that programs be monitored to insure that they do not detract from the goals for which they were designed.

## **Processes**

The final P, processes, addresses the ways in which the other four Ps function. Processes address such issues as cooperative spirit, democratic activities, collaborative efforts, ethical guidelines, and humane activities. They focus on how the other Ps are conducted.

## **Four Levels**

In addition to its focus on the five areas of people, places, policies, programs, and processes, invitational theory identifies levels of functioning. Being human and less than perfect, everyone functions at each level from time to time, but it is the level at which people typically function that determines their approach to life and their ultimate success in personal and professional living.

It is useful here to contemplate the complexity of invitational theory. Many people think they already understand the concept of "inviting." They see it as simply doing nice things--sharing a smile, giving a hug, saying something nice, or buying a gift. While these may be worthwhile activities when used caringly and appropriately, they are only manifestations of an invitational stance one takes. This invitational stance determines the level of personal and professional functioning.

The following levels provide a check system to monitor each of the Five Ps (places, policies, programs, processes, and people) found in and around any human endeavor and that reflect invitational theory in action.

## **Intentionally Disinviting**

The most negative and toxic level of human functioning involves those actions, policies, programs, places, and processes that are deliberately designed to demean, dissuade, discourage, defeat and destroy. Intentionally disinviting functioning might involve a person who is purposely insulting, a policy that is intentionally discriminatory, a program that purposely demeans individuals, or an environment intentionally left unpleasant and unattractive. Unintentionally Disinviting

People, places, policies, programs and processes that are intentionally disinviting are few when compared to those that are unintentionally disinviting. The great majority of disinviting forces that exist are usually the result of a lack of an invitational stance. Because there is no philosophy of trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality, policies are established, programs designed, places arranged, processes evolve, and people behave in ways that are clearly disinviting although such was not the intent.

Individuals who function at the unintentionally disinviting level are often viewed as uncaring, chauvinistic, condescending, patronizing, sexist, racist, dictatorial, or just plain thoughtless. They do not intend to be hurtful or harmful, but because they lack consistency in direction and purpose, they act in disinviting ways. People who function at the unintentionally disinviting level may not intend to be disinviting, but the damage is done. Like being run over by a truck: intended or not, the victim is still dead.

## **Unintentionally Inviting**

People who usually function at the unintentionally inviting level have stumbled serendipitously into ways of functioning that are often effective. However, they have difficulty when asked to explain why they are successful. They can describe in loving detail what they do, but not why.

An example of this is the "natural born" teacher. Such a person may be successful in teaching because he or she exhibits many of the trusting, respecting, and optimistic qualities associated with invitational theory. However, because they lack the fourth critical element, intentionality they lack consistency and dependability in the actions they exhibit, the policies and programs they establish, and the places and processes they create and maintain.

People who are unintentionally inviting are somewhat akin to the early barnstorming airplane pilots. These pioneer pilots did not know exactly why their planes flew, or what caused weather patterns, or much about navigational systems. As long as they stayed close to the ground, followed a railway track, and the weather was clear, they were able to function. But, when the weather turned bad or night fell, they became disoriented and lost. In difficult situations, people who function at the unintentionally inviting level lack dependability in behavior and consistency in direction.

The basic weakness in functioning at the unintentionally inviting level is the inability to identify the reasons for success or failure. Most people know whether

something is working or not, but when it stops working, they are puzzled about how to start it up again. Those who function at the unintentionally inviting level lack a consistent stance--a dependable position from which to operate.

## **Intentionally Inviting**

When individuals function at the intentionally inviting level, they seek to consistently exhibit the assumptions of invitational theory. A beautiful example of intentionality in action is presented by Mizer (1964) who described how schools can function to turn a child "into a zero." Mizer illustrated the tragedy of one such child, then concluded her article with these words:

I look up and down the rows carefully each September at the unfamiliar faces. I look for veiled eyes or bodies scrounged into an alien world. "Look, Kids," I say silently, "I may not do anything else for you this year, but not one of you is going to come out of here a nobody. I'll work or fight to the bitter end doing battle with society and the school board, but I won't have one of you coming out of here thinking of himself [sic] as a zero. (Mizer, 1964, p. 10).

Intentionality can be a tremendous asset for educators and others in the helping professions, for it is a constant reminder of what is truly important in human service.

In invitational theory, everybody and everything adds to, or subtracts from, human existence. Ideally, the factors of people, places, policies, programs, and processes should be so intentionally inviting as to create a world where each individual is cordially summoned to develop physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Those who accept the assumptions of invitational theory not only strive to be intentionally inviting, but once there, continue to grow and develop, to reach for the Plus Factor.

## **The Plus Factor**

When people watch the accomplished musician, the headline comedian, the world class athlete, the master teacher, what he or she does seems simple. It is only when people try to do it themselves that they realize that true art requires painstaking care, discipline, and deliberate planning.

At its best, invitational theory becomes "invisible" because it becomes a means of addressing humanity. To borrow the words of Chuang-tse, an ancient Chinese philosopher, "it flows like water, reflects like a mirror, and responds like an echo." At its best, invitational theory requires implicit, rather than explicit,



expression. When the educator reaches this special plateau, what they do appears effortless. Football teams call it "momentum," comedians call it "feeling the center," world class athletes call it "finding the zone, fighter pilots call it "rhythm." In invitational theory it is called the Plus Factor. A good example of this factor in action was provided by Ginger Rogers, the famous actress and dancer.

When describing dancing with Fred Astair, she said, "It's a lot of hard work, that I do know." Someone responded: "But it doesn't look it, Ginger." Ginger replied "That's why it's magic." Invitational theory, at its best, works like magic. Those who function at the highest levels of inviting become so fluent that the carefully-honed skills and techniques they employ are invisible to the untrained eye. They function with such talented assurance that the tremendous effort involved does not call attention to itself.

### **Four Dimensions**

The goal of invitational theory is to encourage individuals to enrich their lives in each of four basic dimensions: (1) being personally inviting with oneself; (2) being personally inviting with others; (3) being professionally inviting with oneself; and (4) being professionally inviting with others. Like pistons in a finely-tuned engine, the four dimensions work together to give power to the whole movement. While there are times when one of the four dimensions may demand special attention, the overall goal is to seek balance and harmony between personal and professional functioning.

#### **Being Personally Inviting With Oneself**

To be a beneficial presence in the lives of others it is essential that individuals first invite themselves. This means that they view themselves as able, valuable and responsible and are open to experience. Those who adopt invitational theory seek to reinvent and respirit themselves personally.

Being personally inviting with oneself takes an endless variety of forms. It means caring for one's mental health and making appropriate choices in life. By taking up a new hobby, relaxing with a good book, exercising regularly, learning to laugh more, visiting friends, getting sufficient sleep, growing a garden, or managing time wisely, people can rejuvenate their own well-being.

#### **Being Personally Inviting With Others**

Being inviting requires that the feelings, wishes, and aspirations of others be taken into account. Without this, invitational theory could not exist. In practical terms, this means that the social committee might be the most vital committee in any organization.

Specific ways to be personally inviting with others are simple but often overlooked. Getting to know colleagues on a social basis, sending friendly notes, forming a car-pool, remembering birthdays, enjoying a faculty party, practicing politeness, celebrating successes are all examples of invitational theory in action.

## **Being Professionally Inviting With Oneself**

Being professionally inviting with oneself can take a variety of forms, but it begins with ethical awareness and a clear and efficient perception of situations and oneself. In practical terms, being professionally inviting with oneself means trying a new method, seeking certification, learning new skills, returning to graduate school, enrolling in a workshop, attending conferences, reading journals, writing for publication, and making presentations at conferences.

Keeping alive professionally is particularly important because of the rapidly expanding knowledge base. Perhaps never before have knowledge, techniques, and methods been so bountiful. Canoes must be paddled harder than ever just to keep up with the knowledge explosion.

## **Being Professionally Inviting With Others**

The final dimension of invitational theory is being professionally inviting with others. This involves such qualities as treating people, not as labels or groups, but as individuals. It also requires honesty and the ability to accept less-than-perfect behavior of human beings.

In everyday practice, being professionally inviting with others requires careful attention to the policies that are introduced, the programs established, the places created, the processes manifested, and the behaviors exhibited. Among the countless ways that individuals can be professionally inviting with others are to have high aspirations, fight sexism and racism in any form, work cooperatively, behave ethically, provide professional feedback, and maintain an optimistic stance.

Professionals who combine the four dimensions of invitational theory into a seamless whole are well on their way to putting the theory into practice. The successful individual is one who balances the four dimensions to sustain energy and enthusiasm for learning and living.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has introduced invitational theory and presented it as a guiding model for inviting success in one's personal and professional life. It described its foundations of the perceptual tradition and self-concept theory and presented its basic assumptions of trust, respect, optimism and intentionality. It explained how

the areas, levels, and dimensions of functioning work together to encourage human potential.

Increasingly, invitational theory is finding its way into health care facilities, educational institutions, management work places, and parenting. Wherever it goes, it carries the basic message that human potential, while not always evident, is always there, waiting to be discovered and invited forth. Equally important, invitational theory offers a concrete, practical, and successful way to accomplish its stated purposes.

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*William W. Purkey is professor of counselor education at UNC-Greensboro and is co-founder and co-director of the International Alliance for Invitational Education.*

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