

# CHAPTER 4

## GLOBAL WISDOM AND THE AUDACITY OF HOPE: A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP\*

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Our children may learn about the heroes of the past.

Our task is to make ourselves architects of the future.

—Jomo Kenyatta, First President of Kenya<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*The twenty-first century confronts society with challenges that will determine the future of humanity and the planet. Such challenges defy traditional analysis. Paralyzed by the inadequacy of our standard logic, on which much of traditional scholarship relies, we search for meaningful and effective understandings that can guide us – understandings that seem inherently wise and just, and not simply empirically confirmable. Few of us question the need for wisdom, yet to date, academic scholarship has failed to address the role that it plays, and could play, in supporting international organizational processes capable of addressing the world's most demanding societal challenges.<sup>2</sup> This chapter explores the nature of pragmatic wisdom – wisdom that incorporates both profound understanding and action. It uses the founding of an international development initiative, Uniterra, to highlight the need for and influence of wisdom in international*

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\* Based on Adler's work with [Uniterra and Adler \(2006, 2007\)](#).

*organizational processes and outcomes. Uniterra's core structure and central process involve partnering – forming networks of non-hierarchical relationships. The chapter therefore investigates the wisdom needed to create and maintain global partnerships. Given the chapter's focus on pragmatic wisdom, it also explores the concepts of hope and courage, for without hope and courage, wisdom could never move beyond conceptualization to action. The writing style purposely differs from that of most scholarly articles. Beyond presenting a specific case, the writing offers readers the opportunity to experience wisdom via indigenous proverbs from a wide range of the world's more pragmatic wisdom traditions. So as not to interrupt readers' appreciation of the proverbs or reduce their impact or meaning merely to the underlying logical constructs, the chapter uses endnotes rather than more traditional text references.*

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## GLOBAL WISDOM AND THE AUDACITY OF HOPE

In 2002 ..., members of a high-status tribe sexually abused one of Ms Mukhtaran's brothers and then covered up the crime by falsely accusing him of having an affair with a high-status woman. The village's tribal council determined that the suitable punishment for the supposed affair was for high-status men to rape one of the boy's sisters, so the council sentenced Ms. Mukhtaran to be gang-raped.

As members of the high-status tribe danced in joy, four men stripped her naked and took turns raping her. Then they forced her to walk home naked in front of 300 villagers.

In Pakistan's conservative ... society, Ms Mukhtaran's duty was now clear: she was supposed to commit suicide .... Her older brother ... explained: "A girl who has been raped has no honorable place in the village. Nobody respects the girl, or her parents. There's a stigma, and the only way out is suicide."<sup>3</sup>

Does society need to change? Absolutely. Is the enormity of the task seemingly overwhelming? Absolutely. Is there reason for hope? Perhaps, but only when delivered with frame-breaking courage.<sup>4</sup>

[...] instead of killing herself, Ms Mukhtaran testified against her attackers and propounded the shocking idea that the shame lies in raping, rather than in being raped. The rapists [were placed] ... on death row, and [Pakistan's] President ... presented Ms Mukhtaran with the equivalent of \$8,300 and ordered round-the-clock police protection....<sup>5</sup>

Is change possible? Absolutely. Is it probable? No. Moments of profound humanity, wisdom, and courage do occur, yet often remain strangely invisible within the broader society, hidden beneath the negative barrage of more-of-the-same analysis and practiced cynicism. The very moments that keep hope alive often become clear only to those privileged few who are able to learn about the stories; and to the fewer still who somehow transcend the world's all-too-common cynical appellations of naivete' and see within each story its latent potential for transformative change.

Ms Mukhtaran, who had never gone to school herself, used the money to build one school in the village for girls and another for boys because, she said, education is the best way to achieve social change....

"Why should I have spent the money on myself?" she asked, adding, "This way the money is helping ... all the children."<sup>6</sup>

Ms Mukhtaran personifies the audacity of hope.<sup>7</sup> From Ms Mukhtaran, we don't merely learn about a new elementary school and a potentially changed legal statute, but rather about the power of wisdom, courage, and hope to bring about profound societal change. Yet even with the wisest courageous action, is societal change ever easy or certain? No, never.

## **GLOBAL WISDOM AND SOCIETAL CHANGE**

Wisdom begins in wonder

—Socrates<sup>8</sup>

Wisdom is "knowledge of what is true and right coupled with just judgment as to action."<sup>9</sup> Courage transforms wisdom – knowledge of what is true and right – into meaningful action. Hope inspires people to aspire toward dreams that others judge to be unrealistic – dreams that others are incapable of dreaming. Founder and CEO emeritus of VISA International Dee Hock declares that, "It is no failure to fall short of realizing all that we might dream the failure is to fall short of dreaming all that we might realize."<sup>10</sup>

Can society do better than it has done in the past? History would suggest that the answer is either no, or, at best, very unlikely. Yet a multitude of global crises currently challenge us to transcend the confines of pessimistic precedent. Speaking on a much more prominent world stage than Ms Mukhtaran's, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright advises us that, "We have a responsibility in our time, as others have had in theirs, not to be prisoners of history, but to shape history."<sup>11</sup> We have a responsibility to reclaim the audacity of hope. How do we proceed?

## **SHAPING HISTORY: THE AUDACITY OF HOPE**

Only a life lived for others is worth living

—Albert Einstein<sup>12</sup>

"What you do in response to the ocean of suffering may seem insignificant, but it is very important you do it."<sup>13</sup> How do we find the wisdom, courage, and hope needed to respond to what India's Mahatma Gandhi so accurately described as "the ocean of suffering"? What supports us in acting wisely and courageously when the odds we are given by rational analysis insistently require that we quit – that we turn away from situations that are, or appear to be, beyond the reach of

repair? There are many potential answers. One that is currently being tried is to create “a structure of hope” that systematically draws on the collective wisdom, courage, humanity, and dreams of people from throughout the world. We only have the beginning of the story, but nonetheless, its beginning offers a noteworthy approach. The story describes the birth of a global international development initiative in which the founding organizations are consciously attempting to design a structure that can support the “audacity of hope” necessary to make a difference in the world.

## UNITERRA: CREATING A STRUCTURE OF HOPE

Man is the remedy to man

—Proverb of Mali<sup>14</sup>

Heralded as the first major social innovation among international development efforts in more than 30 years, Canadian-based Unitererra was founded as a new type of global initiative.<sup>15</sup> With an initial five-year, \$75 million mandate, Unitererra’s strategic mission is to contribute to achieving the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals while supporting individual countries’ national poverty reduction strategies. The UN’s Millennium Development Goals include: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development – all by the year 2015.<sup>16</sup> American economist Jeffrey Sachs, an extremely influential, and equally controversial, international development expert, unequivocally asserts that “To the extent that there are any international goals, they are the Millennium Development Goals.”<sup>17</sup>

Unitererra was founded by two Canadian-based non-governmental organizations – English-speaking World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and French-speaking Canadian Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI).<sup>18</sup> WUSC’s mission is to foster human development and global understanding through education and training, while CECI’s mission is to fight poverty and exclusion by strengthening the development capacity of disadvantaged communities.<sup>19</sup> The two organizations have experience working in more than 50 of the world’s neediest countries.

The founding organizations do not plan to rely on a headquarters-dominated hierarchy, as such a “traditional model for social and organizational change doesn’t work [and] ... never has .... The problem is that you can’t ... bring permanent solutions in from outside.”<sup>20</sup> Unitererra’s operational vision is therefore based on a field-driven process of international development that draws primarily on the wisdom, experience, and expertise of local people in its network of 14 partner countries.

While the worldwide excitement at Unitererra’s founding was palpable, the leaders were well aware of the dismal record of failure that pervades international joint ventures. Historically, three-quarters of all international joint ventures

fail.<sup>21</sup> The inability of global organizations to work successfully across cultures remains humbling. However, given the unswerving commitment to the importance of its mission, combined with an equally strong belief that new approaches offer untapped possibility, Uniterra chose to focus on the question of “how” to support the joint venture’s success – and thus beat the statistically predictable prognosis of failure – rather than asking “if” the joint venture should proceed. From the beginning, Uniterra understood that its organizational processes could not be limited to those of a single country, but rather had to be drawn from the combined wisdom of all cultures involved.

Whereas this chapter focuses on the founding of Uniterra, it is worth noting that by 2013, a decade after Uniterra was established, it was already recognized as a world leader, having demonstrated its capacity to modernize and achieve significant development results. By implementing innovative approaches and tools, it has succeeded in capacity-building for 150 organizations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and positively impacted the lives of 480,000 beneficiaries of the network of partner organizations. Uniterra has been recognized with the *Prix Hommage Be’ne’volat Que’bec* and the Bill McWhinney Award of Excellence in International Development, as well as being invited by the Government of Australia to present Uniterra’s results-based management approach to a high-level summit in Ghana on the role of civil society and aid effectiveness.

## CREATING THE RIGHT BEGINNING

If you understand the beginning well, the end will not trouble you

–Ashanti Proverb, Ghana<sup>22</sup>

To inaugurate the new partnership, Uniterra brought together their representatives from Asia, Africa, and the Americas to meet in Gaborone, Botswana. The purpose of this first global meeting was to weave together a network of relationships that would be strong enough to put Uniterra’s mission into action and sustain it when faced with the enormity of the task facing organizations that attempt to improve the quality of life on the planet. To develop such a network, Uniterra attempted to draw on the richest possible range of available wisdom and expertise. As an American proverb counsels, “Only trees with deep roots continue to stand in a storm.”

Most dictionary definitions recognize that wisdom includes both contemporary “scholarly knowledge” and traditional “wise sayings.”<sup>23</sup> From the beginning, it was clear that creating an effective partnership network would require drawing on historic wisdom traditions as well as contemporary scholarly expertise, on both subjective and objective experience, and on modern as well as ancient traditions of insight. Given the desire to create something new (rather than simply replicating structures from existing organizations), Uniterra drew primarily on personal insight, and relied much less on the objective experience of other international organizations. Explicitly drawing on the wisdom traditions of each

country, the members of Uniterra identified proverbs from their respective cultures to support each aspect of their new venture.

*Partnering with Each Other: Developing Generative Relationships*

Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable

—Bondei Proverb, Tanzania<sup>24</sup>

The 50 Uniterra representatives arrived from Bolivia, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Canada, Ghana, Guatemala, Guine'e, Malawi, Mali, Nepal, Niger, Senegal, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam as strangers to each other. To begin building a strong network of relationships – a web that would hold in the face of the world's greatest challenges – Uniterra relied on two sources of wisdom: scholarly knowledge and insight from personal experience. In selecting strength-based models (drawn from positive organizational studies) that accentuate and leverage what is working, they moved beyond the more traditional deficit-based models (that focus on fixing what isn't working).<sup>25</sup> Already on the opening morning of the Global Meeting, members of Uniterra were invited to use appreciative inquiry – a strength-based approach – to interview their colleagues about what allowed their most extraordinary professional relationships to flourish.

Remember a particularly great relationship that you have had? What made it so great? So satisfying? What did you and your partner do that allowed the relationship to be so great? Which aspects of the surrounding environment supported the extraordinary quality of your relationship?

In cross-cultural and cross-continental pairs, the interviews elicited colleagues' most personal relationship memories and wisdom.<sup>26</sup> Following the interviews, participants gathered in multicultural teams to collectively make sense of their memories.

What would you say are the global "secrets" to relationship success? What wisdom have we gathered that could support Uniterra in creating a network of global relationships of this extremely high quality?

Armed with a deeper appreciation of what leads to extraordinary relationships among individuals, the appreciative inquiry process was repeated to identify the success factors supporting extraordinary interteam and interorganizational partnerships. For the first, but not the last, time during the meeting, the 50 colleagues – who were already dropping their identities as strangers – were involved in wisdom creation (in combining "knowledge of what is true" with personal "insight").<sup>27</sup>

Subsequently, each day opened with "Morning Connections", a process designed to build trust and deepen relationships across projects, sectors, countries, and continents. For example, one morning participants created a web of connections, with each connection focused on helping to advance a colleague's current domestic or future global initiative. To reduce the historic reliance on top-down hierarchical relationships and strengthen direct interaction among field-driven operations, the headquarters-representatives did not participate. Each conversation deepened a particular personal relationship and increased the probability

of successful, networked non-headquarters-reliant cross-cultural, cross-sectorial, and cross-continental alliances.

To further develop trust among network members, participants presented artifacts that symbolized their most profound personal commitment to Unitera's goal of creating a better and more equitable world.<sup>28</sup> As trust grew, generative relationships formed that were capable of producing new value for the organization that could not have been foreseen or created by any individual acting alone.<sup>29</sup> Watching the process, a Vietnamese member of Unitera captured the strength he saw emerging in the network with a proverb from his culture: *A tree cannot make a small rock, however three trees together form a big mountain.*<sup>30</sup>

### *Partnering with Oneself: Developing Insight*

Some doors open only from the inside

—Ancient Sufi Saying

British Poet David Whyte observes that:

We are a busy people in a busy ... culture. But even the busiest person wants wisdom and sense in busyness .... All of us want to work smarter rather than harder. Yet all of us are familiar with frantic busyness as a state that continually precludes us from opening to the quiet and contemplation it takes to be ... [wise].<sup>31</sup>

Confirming the experience of most profound wisdom traditions, Harvard Professor Howard Gardner's research identified reflection as one of only three competencies that distinguishes extraordinary leaders from their more ordinary counterparts.<sup>32</sup> Leaders who make extraordinary contributions to society take time everyday to step back from their workday busyness to consider the broader meanings behind what they are doing and why and how they are doing it. In contrast, and to the detriment of the quality of their contribution, most people focus primarily, if not exclusively, on action, rather than reflection.<sup>33</sup>

To support the members of Unitera in accessing their personal wisdom, and thus to their ability to make more significant contributions, reflective practices were integrated into the daily rhythm of the inaugural meeting. Rituals of quiet contemplation opened and closed each day, starting with individual reflection and journal writing, and followed by small- and then large-group discussions on relevant issues that the personal reflection had raised. Perhaps Arthur Frank best summarizes the value of reflection for people as committed to contributing to the world as those who had gathered in Botswana for Unitera's inaugural meeting:

To live is to write one's credo, every day in every act. I pray for a world that offers us each the gift of reflective space, the Sabbath quiet, to recollect the fragments of our days and acts. In those recollections we may see a little of how our lives affect others, and then imagine in the days ahead, how we might do small and specific acts that create a world we believe every person has a right to deserve.<sup>34</sup>

Without the wisdom that comes from personal reflection, other forms of wisdom become less relevant, if not altogether meaningless.

*Partnering with Generosity: Giving Gifts*

Giving does not impoverish the giver

—Proverb of Guinea

In the broadest sense, Uniterra's work, along with that of most international development agencies, involves gift-giving; giving the world the gift of a more civil, compassionate, sustainable, and economically vibrant society. At the meeting, Uniterra explored the nature and rituals of giving gifts across cultures. While presenting the group with gifts from their respective cultures, representatives from each country explained their culture's gift-giving rituals. Who gives a gift to whom? When? Why? Is gift-giving always reciprocal? How is respect communicated? Is the gift received in public or in private? How does the recipient show appreciation? How does the giving and receiving of gifts help create and strengthen relationships and partnerships? From the exchange of gifts came a more profound understanding of the reciprocal nature of generosity. Both givers and receivers gain; both receive meaning. Unless there is mutuality, the exchange strips recipients of their respect and their personal power. International development, at its best, is founded on a mutuality of generosity. As is wisely said in Burkina Faso, "The father guides his son and the son guides his father."<sup>35</sup>

Living on a different continent and in a completely dissimilar culture, Ms Mukhtaran similarly understood the wisdom and power of partnering with generosity:

Ms Mukhtaran, who had never gone to school herself, used the [\$8,300 the Pakistani government had given her] ... to build one school in the village for girls and another for boys .... "Why should I have spent the money on myself?" she asked, adding, "This way the money is helping ... all the children...."

[Ms Mukhtaran began] studying in ... [the new school's] 4th-grade class.<sup>36</sup>

As Martin Luther King recognized years ago, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."<sup>37</sup> Mutuality underlies the interrelated structure of today's world and encompasses the very meaning of generosity in international development.

*Partnering with Expertise: Developing Understanding and Competencies*

With the aid of the tree, a tree-climber makes contact with the sky

—Ashanti Proverb, Ghana

Everyone within Uniterra's network knew that knowledge was necessary, but not sufficient for success. To facilitate the transition from primary involvement in local projects to simultaneous participation in local, regional, and global initiatives, Uniterra presented a series of briefings on current social, cultural, political, and economic conditions throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The briefings were complemented with cross-cultural skills training.<sup>38</sup> Uniterra also



hosted its first Global Cultural Festival, with everyone participating in the music, dance, storytelling, film, drama, and other cultural rituals that are unique to each represented country.

Further deepening culture-specific knowledge, an animated not-so-trivial cross-cultural-pursuit collaboration took place over each lunch, in which colleagues tried to discover which of a series of seemingly incongruous facts described each country. They sought, for example, to discover for which countries the following is true.

An elderly man, over 70 years old, was elected president of this country primarily by the nation's youth.<sup>39</sup>

This country went from being unable to produce enough rice to feed its own people to becoming one of the world's largest rice exporters.<sup>40</sup>

Participants also sought to better understand the context, by discovering the conditions that had allowed the particular "facts" to become true. While adding to everyone's knowledge about the world, the not-so-trivial cross-cultural pursuit collaborations also increased Uniterra's understanding of the dynamics of possibility. How do seemingly impossible paradoxical events occur? What can a network, such as Uniterra's, do to create more ostensibly unbelievable positive "facts" in the world?<sup>41</sup>

Years ago, American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked that "The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common."<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately today, with more than half the world's children living in poverty, extreme deprivation has become "the common."<sup>43</sup> It takes the ability to see miracles to be able to imagine how all the world's children could have such basics as clean water, enough to eat, and primary education. The ability to see possibility, even in situations where others cannot, is one of the most valuable competencies that international development experts can bring to their work. If we honestly assess the global situation, is not the ability to imagine possibility a prerequisite for any potentially effective development effort? Positive change – reuniting reality with possibility – only has a chance if the world reclaims its ability to imagine outcomes that are so positive that they are worthy of the world's – and our own personal – best efforts. The members of Uniterra thus began reclaiming their collective right to dream – their innate ability to imagine and to believe in miracles.

At its inaugural meeting, and more importantly, in its work in the world, Uniterra is attempting to learn to be global and local, to respect the common humanity of all people while honoring each culture's characteristic uniqueness; to recognize the depth of tragedy in the world while continuing to believe in the power of creating miracles. As Nobel Laureate Albert Einstein understood, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."<sup>44</sup>

### *Partnering with the Unknown: A Parking Lot for Questions*

For every problem there is one solution which is simple, neat and wrong

–H. L. Mencken, American political commentator

Honoring Confucius' dictum that "real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance," questions that could not be answered immediately during the conference briefings and discussions were sent to a "Parking Lot for Questions," a highly visible place where unanswered questions could stay posted until someone within the group, not necessarily the presenter, found an answer. Unanswered questions remained indefinitely in the parking lot – a testament to the fact that, in the type of ambiguous, rapidly changing environment faced by development organizations today, many of the most important questions will remain unanswerable.

The "Parking Lot for Questions" visibly contradicted the left-over, 400-year-old Newtonian worldview that gave us the illusion that everything in life is either "known" or currently "unknown-but-ultimately-knowable." It is not; and certainly not in the complex world of international development. With the help of chaos theory and the complexity sciences, Uniterria understood that beyond the known and the unknown-but-knowable is the unknowable. In today's turbulent environment, we accept that good questions often guide us much more powerfully than do their definitive answers. The essence of wisdom is to know that we don't know.<sup>45</sup>

### *Partnering with the World: Engaging the Public*

It requires wisdom to understand wisdom: the music is nothing if the audience is deaf  
 –Walter Lippman, political commentator<sup>46</sup>

The presentation on public engagement raised questions about the underlying reasons for the public's general lack of awareness, and similar lack of concern, about global issues and crises.

Is it that the public doesn't know about Ms Mukhtaran? Or is it that they don't care?

How could they not know? How could they not care?

Using knowledge alone, such questions cannot be addressed. For even minimally appropriate levels of understanding, we must combine knowledge with traditional wisdom-based approaches to understanding – those of insight and sense-making.

*How could they not know? How could they not care?* Marianne Williamson thoughtfully reflects on why the public seemingly neither knows nor cares:

The fact that we go about our lives as though the survival of the world is not at stake is not the sign of a stiff upper lip. It is the sign, rather, of a society not yet able or willing to hold a conversation about its deepest pain.<sup>47</sup>

How could Uniterria succeed in engaging such a public?

In response to the same profound question, South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu quietly offers his own succinct wisdom: "My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together."<sup>48</sup> Decades earlier, German-born Albert Einstein foreshadowed Desmond Tutu's words: "A human being is part of a whole, the universe. Our task must be to free ourselves from the delusion of separateness."<sup>49</sup> As a partnership organization, is Uniterria's public engagement role to remind the world

that “we can only be human together” and to help free it of its delusion of separateness? And if so, how? These crucially important questions unequivocally need the best of both our knowledge and wisdom, but may in fact remain unanswerable. For now, they prominently remain in the parking lot of all of our minds.

*Partnering with Structure: Designing a Field-Driven Process*

When the moon is not full, the stars shine more brightly

—Proverb of the Buganda People, Uganda<sup>50</sup>

Using the vocabulary of international business, Uniterra sought to operate more in the fluid, flattened, networked structure of twenty-first century transnationals than in the more centralized traditional hierarchies of twentieth century multinationals.<sup>51</sup> Rather than a centralized hierarchical structure in which a single, Northern hemisphere donor country attempts to impose solutions, however well intended, on the peoples of the South, it sought to design a web of partnerships within the organization as well as with businesses, government agencies, and civil sector organizations external to Uniterra. To benefit from such partnerships, Uniterra needed to learn to leverage the synergies inherent in working across organizations, cultures, countries, and continents.<sup>52</sup> Because the organizations that founded Uniterra had already taken the lead in using decentralized, networked structures, the present operational challenge was primarily to extend the structures globally. That no one knew exactly how to create and to effectively use such a network for international development was evident to everyone; that it had to be tried was even more evident. As an ancient Chinese proverb advises, “Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”<sup>53</sup>

*From Traditional Mechanistic Organizations to More Fluid Organic Structures* The *Talmud* tells us that “We don’t see things as they are. We see things as we are.”<sup>54</sup> Philosopher and scholar Thomas Kuhn, in explaining how thought systems evolve, counseled that it was impossible to see something new until you have a metaphor that will let you perceive it.<sup>55</sup> So to be able to invent a new structure, the members of Uniterra first needed to their thinking, and thus themselves. Prior to changing their thinking, they had to change the metaphors through which they viewed the world and their organization.

What allows individuals and organizations to let go of prior worldviews and approaches that seemingly worked in the past? To even ask the right questions requires a profound commitment to the organization’s purpose and a deep trust in the individuals involved. Otherwise, the completely human response is “Why bother?” Canadian Ian Wilson wisely counseled that “No amount of sophistication is going to allay the fact that all your knowledge is about the past and all your decisions are about the future.”<sup>56</sup> The challenge for people such as those at Uniterra is that they face situations of such complexity that no one can realistically have confidence in their success. Choosing to engage in spite of “not knowing” is driven by the profound belief that something must be done, combined with optimism (as opposed to confidence) that one’s approach will work. If people refrain from acting except in those situations in which they are certain they will succeed, they will not act at all. Confidence in successful outcomes is not a reasonable expectation.<sup>57</sup>

Following the advice of chaos-and-complexity theorists, Uniterra experimented with envisioning their emerging organizational structure as organic, rather than viewing it through the lens of a traditional mechanistic organization chart. Following Kuhn's advice to change metaphors in order to change thinking patterns, Uniterra selected the metaphor of a spider plant to catalyze its ability to see the new possibilities inherent in a more organic organizational structure. Using this biological metaphor, Uniterra began questioning the role, or lack thereof, of all forms of centralized leadership, hierarchy, authority, and control:

If Uniterra was like a spider-plant, what role would the central pot play? How small could the central pot be? How best could the offshoots connect to the pot?<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, they questioned the relationship of the worldwide operations to Canada.

How should Uniterra define its stems – its “umbilical cords”? How could it best use its stems to support the autonomy of each decentralized region and project (each offshoot) while still assuring the network's overall integration and accountability?<sup>59</sup>

They also questioned how Uniterra could best support the individual country and sector operations in working more directly with each another.

How could Uniterra encourage its network of offshoots to work more closely together, without directly involving the pot? How could the spider-plant metaphor help Uniterra's network to manage its multiple internal and external partnerships in a generative and effective, yet decentralized, fashion?<sup>60</sup>

When using the spider-plant metaphor for organizational design, management scholar Gareth Morgan suggests a number of insights that are particularly relevant. From Morgan's perspective, Uniterra needed to:<sup>62</sup>

- *Break the constraint of a large pot:* Uniterra's overall network can increase its effectiveness and grow larger in a decentralized fashion, while reducing the size of its headquarters.
- *Integrate operations without exerting direct control:* the success of Uniterra's decentralization depends on creating good stems, not on instituting traditional control mechanisms.
- *Avoid getting caught in the uniformity syndrome:* Uniterra needs to avoid cloning. It needs to adapt each partnership (each hybrid offshoot) to its particular local environment and situation.
- *Encourage bumble bees:* to benefit from potential synergies and field-driven coordination, Uniterra needs to encourage the offshoots to work directly with each other without involving the central pot.

Shifting from a more centralized hierarchy to a flatter, more inclusive organizational structure is often most difficult for the people in the center. Giving away power, even for the best reasons, is never easy. One of Uniterra's Asian-based Canadian directors struggled with how to empower his local colleagues to take more responsibility for making decisions. He neither wanted to continue the culturally expected hierarchical pattern in which he, as “the boss,” made all the

decisions nor to violate fundamental cultural norms by seeming to abdicate his decision-making responsibilities. His innovative decision was to request that his Asian colleagues suggest a course of action whenever they brought him problems to resolve. He could then role-model the more empowering and inclusive behavior he desired in the network by simply accepting and then publicly implementing his colleagues' best suggestions. In cases in which their initial suggestions were less than what the situation called for, he could coach his colleagues (primarily by asking questions) on how to improve their suggestions. In all cases, he would be augmenting the capacity of the network-as-a-whole to assess situations appropriately and to develop effective courses of action. The resulting dynamic would be a subtle, culturally appropriate transfer of power from the center to the network.

As Uniterra worked with the spider-plant metaphor, it realized that the structure they sought to design was both less centralized, and yet more integrated, than their image of a spider plant. They therefore allowed the spider-plant metaphor to evolve into a new, equally organic but less centralized, "web" metaphor. Yet the web metaphor also raised concerns: "Wasn't the image of a web too fragile to support the network of strong partnerships Uniterra sought to foster?" From the perspective of traditional organizational design, the most optimistic answer is a cautious, "Probably too fragile, but we hope not." From the perspective of ancient cultural wisdom, however, the answer to the same question is a resounding, "No, the web is absolutely not too fragile!" As an Ethiopian proverb asserts, "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion."<sup>62</sup> "Yes," the ancient wisdom declares, "a web is certainly strong enough to support the most ambitious aspirations."

### *From Maximizing Rules to Minimizing Specifications*

How do complex adaptive systems – such as the web of innovative, self-organizing initiatives that make up Uniterra – simultaneously support the network's overall success, leverage its multicultural relationships, and give as much freedom as possible to each individual partnership? For organic, web-like networks in complex environments, rules don't work. In acting like control mechanisms, rules force people and systems to act in uniform and predictable ways. Rules constrict behavior and thereby impede needed flexibility and innovation. In contrast, minimum specifications – "min-specs" – do work, as they embody the minimum critical-success factors organizations need to succeed.<sup>63</sup>

Selecting the fewest and best min-specs is not easy. To make certain that Uniterra chose min-specs based on its current and future strengths, it used strength-based appreciative questions, such as:

1. Describe a moment when you and your partners performed at their absolute best, a moment when you were particularly and rightfully proud of your team.
2. Which min-specs supported those moments of extremely high performance? What were the conditions, without which, it would have been impossible for your partnership to reach such outstanding success?

Based on these first appreciative questions, which generated a broad list of possible min-specs, the group reduced the number of specifications to the smallest set needed to support the global network's overall success.

3. Which min-specs appear to be needed in all situations worldwide to support extremely high network performance?
4. Is there any circumstance in which you can imagine extremely high performance without one of the identified min-specs? If so, drop it, as it's not a min-spec.

In minimizing the number of specifications guiding it, organizations maximize their freedom to respond appropriately and effectively to whatever combination of challenges confront it. The additional freedom afforded by min-specs, however, cannot be realized if those participating in the network have not developed a high enough level of trust in their own thinking and wisdom as well as that of their colleagues.

### *Partnering with Challenges: Asking Wicked Questions*

Wisdom is the ability to offer useful advice to others about the pragmatics of everyday life

—C. Peterson and M. Seligman, *Psychologists*<sup>64</sup>

The Nepalese are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and backwardness.<sup>65</sup> Almost 50 percent of Nepalese live in absolute poverty, lacking even basic amenities.<sup>66</sup> Poverty in Nepal continues to increase while the gap between rich and poor widens.<sup>67</sup> .... Unfortunately, according to concerned Nepalese, development experts have succeeded in bringing more issues to the table than solutions.

Given the government's lack of accountability, should Uniterra attempt to develop Nepalese organizations' capacity to govern effectively and to provide adequate services? How might Nepal draw on the global expertise of other countries that have successfully addressed similar challenges? How can Uniterra proceed without joining the history of well-intentioned, but ultimately ineffective, development efforts?<sup>68</sup>

Challenges faced in international development are complex, and never have easy answers. Complex challenges are sometimes referred to as wicked problems because their characteristics are not reducible to their constituent parts.<sup>69</sup> When trying to understand complexity, neither simple nor complicated cause-and-effect relationships explain the current situation or accurately predict the future. Descriptively, whereas the solutions to simple and complicated problems tend to follow rules – and thus seem to act in a more predictable, machine-like manner – complex problems don't follow rules, and thus seem to behave in more unpredictable, life-like ways. As Uniterra and the Nepalese are well aware, if the situation was merely simple or complicated, rather than complex, the problems such as poverty would have been solved years ago. Moreover, even when successfully resolved, a solution to a complex problem in one situation rarely functions as a recipe that can be applied to other, seemingly similar situations. Complex challenges therefore call for a combination of wisdom and more traditional analytic approaches, mixed with seemingly infinite creativity, persistence, and patience.

To make best use of the assembled network of wisdom, experience, expertise, and alternative perspectives, Uniterra formed cross-cultural and cross-continental

coaching teams to work on each country's challenges. The coaches resisted the temptation to immediately suggest possible solutions. Rather, they endeavored to deepen their understanding of each unique challenge by exposing its underlying assumptions. The coaches asked what are often referred to as wicked questions, questions designed to reveal contradictory assumptions about the challenge and its context.<sup>70</sup> Such wicked questions, which never have obvious answers, often reveal paradoxical assumptions that the team has allowed to subconsciously shape, and therefore constrain, its actions and choices. Because such assumptions – even when completely inaccurate – are often implicitly accepted as true based on popular beliefs, they are rarely questioned and are particularly difficult to expose.

Using wicked questions, along with other appreciative techniques, nominally slows down the process of addressing challenges, including in situations whose severity begs for immediate action. Such slowed-down processes, however, are much more likely to produce options that work in complex situations than are any of the more commonly used, and seemingly more efficient, forms of analysis. Underscoring the trap of apparent, but false, efficiency, the Shona people in Zimbabwe remind us that, “Running is not getting there!”<sup>71</sup> The wisdom of the people of Niger reinforces the same warning: “Going slowly does not keep one from reaching the destination.”<sup>72</sup>

### *Partnering with Success: Designing Reality by Committing to a Dream*

Hope doesn't kill; it's rushing that kills

—Proverb of the Ndebele People, Zimbabwe

Taddy Blecher joined the members of Uniterra for an evening of intense discussions on the power of courage, tenacity, partnering, and believing in self-created miracles to turn seemingly impossible dreams into reality. Lauded by South Africa's President Mbeki as one of the country's pioneers of change, this actuary-turned-entrepreneur officially launched CIDA University based on a stunningly innovative educational model.<sup>73</sup>

Organization scholars view deviance as behavior that significantly departs from norms, with most discussion of deviance historically having focused on negative behavior.<sup>74</sup> More recently, scholars and consultants are emphasizing positive deviance.<sup>75</sup> From the beginning, CIDA has recruited students based on an appreciative approach aimed at amplifying positive deviance. Some observers describe CIDA's business model as leveraging self-created miracles. CIDA looks for “learners who, despite severe disadvantages, have [excelled] ... academically and who [also find] time to ... contribute to their communities.”<sup>76</sup> Within just a few years, CIDA's graduates began winning top performance awards and attracting Africa's most forward looking employers. Corporate interest, however, wasn't motivated primarily by altruism. As one Afrikaans executive explained, “CIDA University is the next Silicon Valley. Any African company that doesn't recognize that will not succeed in the 21st century.”<sup>77</sup> CIDA identifies and brilliantly educates the best-of-the-best. No company can succeed in the twenty-first century by hiring the second or third tier. No society can succeed without broadly educating its population, including the best-of-the-best.

Building on CIDA's success, Uniterra began experimenting with appreciative approaches to help them to use positive deviance to ignite about their own extraordinary organizational performance. Initiating the process, they first selected photos highlighting their most spectacular achievements over the prior year and then shared them with their colleagues. At what was later labeled the "Exhibition of the Extraordinary," the group identified global patterns in what led to spectacular performance – positive deviance – and began to discover the conditions that consistently supported such extraordinary outcomes. At the same time, they became increasingly aware of the power of certain images (the visual "positive deviants") to capture an audience's attention visually, emotionally, and intellectually. Amidst the cacophony of visual stimuli constantly bombarding people, the competition for the world's attention (to notice both the images and the messages they embed) is intense. Attracting attention is a critical precursor for all public engagement as well as for obtaining colleague commitment.

*Partnering with Hope: Designing the Architecture of the Future*

We judge a person's wisdom by his hope

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, American poet<sup>78</sup>

Whenever we try to speak up in an organization we reveal the precarious balance of innocence and experience in our voice. Too much innocence and we are sensed as "dangerous idealists," too much experience and we may sabotage everything we touch with a practiced cynicism.<sup>79</sup>

The challenge facing Uniterra, along with every other organization committed to creating a better and more equitable world, is how to remarry wisdom with hope – experience with optimism. Wisdom and hope are what organizations and individuals bring to challenging situations; neither are ever the simple outcomes of objectively assessing reality. In Pakistan, there was neither wisdom nor hope in the rape and threatened murder of Ms Mukhtaran. If she had allowed an objective analysis of her circumstances to define her reality, she would long ago have succumbed to historical precedent and accepted suicide as her preordained fate. She didn't; and we, the rest of the world, look on in awe at her wisdom, courage, and unrealistic – naïve – optimism.

The struggle for Uniterra, and ultimately its choice, is to find the courage to approach a world that is sadly lacking in wisdom and hope and to bring both qualities more fully back into their work and the world. No matter how admirable, Ms Mukhtaran's efforts, as one woman alone, cannot change the world. A global network of Ms Mukhtarans, however, could change the world. It is for that reason that Uniterra was launched. With palpable yearning, we wait and hope that Uniterra's partnership network of wisdom, experience, and commitment will make a difference in the quality of our lives and those of our children and our children's children.

We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children

—Kenyan Proverb<sup>80</sup>



## NOTES

1. As found at <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/archives/jun70.htm>.
2. For an exception, see [Kessler and Bailey \(2007\)](#).
3. Story excerpted from [Kristof \(2004\)](#).
4. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1982) defines courage as the "willingness to confront risk to do what one thinks is right." Courage requires "walking naked into the land of uncertainty" ([Quinn, 1996](#), p. 3). By anyone's definition, Ms Mukhtaran demonstrated courage. See [Worline and Quinn \(2003\)](#) on courageous principled action.
5. [Kristof \(2004\)](#).
6. [Kristof \(2004\)](#).
7. Based on Martin Luther King, Obama included "the audacity of hope" in his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech ("Everyone Loves Obama", 2004). Perhaps the reason hope is considered audacious within the fields of leadership and organization studies is that it has so consistently been ignored ([Luthans & Avolio, 2003](#), p. 253; also see [Peterson & Luthans, 2003](#)).
8. Socrates: [www.quotedb.com/quotes/1499](http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/1499).
9. [Stein \(1969](#), p. 1639). For alternative definitions of wisdom, see [Peterson and Seligman \(2004\)](#) and review psychological perspectives on wisdom.
10. As stated by [Hock \(1997\)](#) and cited at: <http://www.parshift.com/Speakers/Speak010.htm>.
11. Quote from Albright's June 5, 1997 Harvard University commencement address; as cited in "[Albright's Words: Global Task for U.S.](#)" (1997).
12. As cited at: <http://www.motivational-inspirational-corner.com/getquote.html?authorid=23>
13. Gandhi as cited in [Franck, Roze, and Connolly \(1998](#), p. 93).
14. Although the traditional proverb uses "man," its meaning is not gender specific.
15. See [Aarup and Raufflet \(2004\)](#) for background on initial formation of Unitera.
16. For UN's Millennium Development Goals, see: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.
17. Sachs, as cited in [Eviatar \(2004\)](#).
18. Although most international business literature has focused on the private sector, there is a growing literature on NGOs; see review by [Teegen, Doh, and Vachani \(2004\)](#).
19. WUSC's mission is to foster human development and global understanding through education and training. CECI's mission is to fight poverty and exclusion by strengthening the development capacity of disadvantaged communities.
20. Sternin as cited in [Dorsey \(2000](#), p. 284).
21. For private sector international joint ventures, see the three-quarters failure rate is as reported in the A.T. Kearney study cited in [Haebeck, Kroger, and Trum \(2000\)](#) and [Schuler and Jackson \(2001\)](#). [Yan and Zeng \(1999\)](#) report on the instability of international joint ventures. Although the definitions (complete termination vs. significant change of ownership) and overall results vary, numerous studies report substantial international joint venture instability, including 55% termination ([Harrigan, 1988](#)), 49% termination ([Barkema & Vermeulen, 1997](#)), and 68% instability through termination or acquisition ([Park & Russo, 1996](#)). Also see [Hamel's \(1991\)](#) classic article.
22. Cited at: <http://www.afriprov.org/resources/dailyproverbs.htm>; drawn from [Burton \(1865\)](#).
23. Wisdom, as defined in [Stein \(1969](#), p. 1639).
24. As cited at: <http://www.afritopic.com/afritopic-proverbs-a.htm>.
25. See [Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn \(2003\)](#) and [Dutton and Heaphy \(2003\)](#).
26. For a discussion of appreciative inquiry, see [Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros \(2003\)](#) and [Fry, Barrett, Seiling, and Whitney \(2002\)](#). See [Peterson and Seligman \(2003\)](#) on the nature of people's most positive relationships.
27. [Stein \(1969](#), p. 1639).

28. All parties perceived working for Unitererra to be extremely meaningful and significant. As in similar organizations, "meaningfulness is not necessarily dependent on the goals actually being realized: the pursuit of valued goals ... may by itself foster a sense of purpose (Baumeister, 1991; Emmons, 1991, as cited in Pratt & Ashford, 2003, p. 311)." See Pratt and Ashford (2003) for a review of the literature on fostering meaningfulness.
29. See Zimmerman, Lindberg, and Plsek (1998) on generative relationships in chaotic/complex organizations.
30. Proverb contributed by Duong Hoang, Vietnamese Unitererra sectorial specialist.
31. Whyte (1994, p. 98).
32. Cited in Howard Gardner Creativity & Leadership Video Guide, p. 20; see Gardner (1995).
33. See Drucker (1999), Loehr and Schwartz (2001), and Palmer (2000).
34. Franck et al. (1998, p. 280); new first edition of Franck et al. (1998) by St Martin's Press.
35. Proverb of Unitererra Burkina Faso representatives offers inescapable wisdom on international development. The meaning is not gender specific.
36. Kristof (2004).
37. King (1963) as cited at: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/civilrts/excerpts.htm>
38. See Adler (2008, among others) for cross-cultural management competencies needed for global success.
39. Country is Senegal; the president is Abdoulaye Wade (see Ellis, 2004 at AllAfrica.com).
40. Vietnam.
41. For a list of cultural facts Unitererra explored, see "A Game of Not-So-Trivial Cross-Cultural Pursuit" (Adler, 2007, p. 435).
42. Quote as found at: <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/r/ralph-waldo125383.html>
43. See the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Report (Dugger, 2004).
44. Einstein quote as cited at the Quote DB website: <http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/12>
45. See Meacham (1990, p. 185, 187, 201) as cited in Weick (2003, p. 71).
46. As found at: <http://www.worldofquotes.com/author/Walter-Lippman/1/>
47. Williamson (2004: introduction).
48. The quote attempts to bring the meaning of ubuntu or botho into English, is found at: <http://www.tutufoundation-usa.org/exhibitions.html>.
49. Quote as found at: <http://designinglife.com/index.php/Main/CollaborationMints>.
50. Proverb as found at: <http://oneproverb.net/bwfolder/africanbw.html>.
51. See Bartlett and Ghoshal (1998) on transnationals and Adler (2008) on the evolution of international organizational cultures.
52. See Adler (2008) for a discussion of the advantages of cultural synergy.
53. Retrieved from: <http://chineseculture.about.com/library/literature/blspro-verb-ad.htm>.
54. The *Torah* is the written scriptures of the Jewish people.
55. Kuhn (1962).
56. Wilson retrieved from: <http://home.bi.no/fgl88001/sigs.htm>.
57. See Luthans and Avolio (2003, p. 252) and Strajkovic and Luthans (1998b, p. 66) on confidence and self-efficacy.
58. Based on Morgan's spider-plant metaphor (Morgan, 1993, pp. 63–89).
59. Morgan (1993, pp. 63–89).
60. Morgan (1993, pp. 63–89).
61. Morgan (1993, pp. 63–89).
62. Retrieved from <http://www.engenderhealth.org/ia/cbc/ethiopia-2.html> and <http://oneproverb.net/bwfolder/africanbw.html>
63. See Zimmerman et al. (1998).
64. Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 181).
65. "Vicious poverty" (2001).

66. "Vicious poverty" (2001).
67. "Vicious poverty" (2001).
68. As described by Kabita Bhattarai, the Harvard-educated Nepalese Uniterra representative.
69. See Zimmerman et al. (1998).
70. See Zimmerman's summary of wicked questions at: [http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgware/archive/think/main\\_aides5.html](http://www.plexusinstitute.org/edgware/archive/think/main_aides5.html)
71. Proverb retrieved from: <http://www.bulawayo1872.com/aw/shona.htm>.
72. Proverb contributed by Uniterra's Niger representatives to the Global Meeting.
73. See background on CIDA University (<http://www.cida.co.za/>) and on Taddy Blecher (Aarup & Raufflet, 2003, among others).
74. Based on Robinson and Bennett (1995) and Warren (2003).
75. For an in depth discussion of positive deviance in creating extraordinary organizations, see Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) and Dorsey (2000).
76. Davie (2001).
77. Private conversation with South African executive in New York City, October 21, 2004.
78. Original quote "We judge a man's wisdom by his hope" was rendered gender-neutral. Retrieved from: <http://www.worldofinspiration.com/Quotes.aspx?pg=1&category=5>
79. Whyte, D. (2001). *Crossing the unknown sea: Work as a pilgrimage of identity* (Reprint edition). New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
80. Kenyan Proverb found in Duncan (1994).

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