

Liberation & Communication

Tapping the Wisdom of the Collective Chaordic Spirit

Christine Whitney Sanchez

milagro27@cox.net

This article focuses on Christine Whitney Sanchez's experience of combining OST and AI and how it led to the international Appreciative Inquiry to collect stories about successful chaordic organizing, Collective Chaordic Spirit.



I was journaling at my favorite coffee house a few days after facilitating my first Open Space Technology (OST) meeting. The results reinforced my passion for emerging the collective intelligence of groups engaged in inspired thinking and action. Participants quickly self-organized, spoke passionately about their own points of view, felt validated and excited about the convergence of their ideas and resulting organizational direction. Yet I sensed something could enhance the experience, opening people, getting beyond strongly held opinions to richer communication and collective goodwill for journeying into the future. That day, sipping my cappuccino, I dreamt about combining the warmth and heart of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with the passion bounded by responsibility imbedded in OST.

Balancing Liberation and Communication

That was six years ago. Today, I frequently use AI and OST in concert because they liberate the human spirit while reminding us of our deep connections, passions and willingness to act on behalf of the whole. Each has its own transformative power and beauty but together they provide a sacred and affirmative container for any size group to engage through communication and liberation.

I fell in love with AI when I had one professional foot in transpersonal psychotherapy and the other in organizational consulting. What I cherished about being a therapist - following the vibrant threads in a client's story to where all things are connected, was mirrored in my first appreciative interview.



Which Comes First - Communication or Liberation?

Discerning whether to start with liberation or communication is a mix of intuition and data. If the group is negative and disconnected, AI reminds them of affirmative listening and the riches to be found in our stories. If the system needs to be freed up before meaningful dialogue and inspired decision-making can occur, then begin with OST. Both methods offer balance - the personal balanced with the universal, diversity balanced with unity and chaos balanced with order. Two themes are always present: communicating better and liberating minds and hearts to serve shared purpose.

Telling a “Peak Experience Story”

I would like to share a story about a peak experience, a time when I felt most alive and engaged, open to learning and most connected to my life's purpose. This is the Collective Chaordic Spirit story, where an OST annual meeting led to an international appreciative Inquiry.

Open Space Technology Leads to International Appreciative Inquiry Research

Collective Chaordic Spirit, an initiative of the Chaordic Commons, was conceived in July 2002, at the first Owning Member Annual Meeting in Virginia. I was facilitating the convergence of the two-day OST event and as always with OST no tidy formula brought it together. The genius of the collective shone, taking the myriad perspectives, looking beyond the apparent chaos of ideas and suggestions to the underlying patterns of strategic action. While groups were reporting out on “What are the opportunities and challenges for growing chaordic¹ organizations, including the Commons, and how can we most creatively proceed?” the project idea struck me – to organize an international Appreciative Inquiry to collect stories about successful chaordic organizing.



The sticky wall was a tapestry of chaordic prospects

The concept paper was posted on the Chaordic Commons website and three months later, interested members built a design team and wrote a proposal to the Council of Trustees for funding to attract, interview and train twenty-five volunteers to conduct up to 200 interviews with change leaders around the world.

In March 2003, we gathered in Phoenix for community building, Appreciative Chaordic Inquiry orientation, to design the project and to draft the pilot interview questions. The two days balanced clarity about the work with openness about how we would get there. Half of the group was experienced AI practitioners and the other half were steeped in chaordic theory.


The first interviews were conducted in April and Collective Chaordic Spirit (CCS) was born, nine months after conception. We interviewed over 150 change leaders from Europe, Canada, Latin America, Africa and the US who told us that all kinds of people in all types of organizations get results by passionately doing what they do best and by gathering the

people they need – even by working around the system. They shared personal insights into leading and collaborating on the edge of chaos. We collected stories from leaders operating in a creative “chaordic” zone, spontaneously organizing to do the job.



“We committed an audacious act setting out to do the impossible, then were challenged and just had to do it.”

Quote from a Change Leader

Change leaders working on the edge shared success stories about concrete and measurable increases in efficiency, program success, customer and job satisfaction, and decreases in employee turnover and in time from idea to production. 

“She reduced the debt, coordinated a 5 month team investigation, terminated a coach, started new programs, hosted the Super Bowl and a Div. 1A Basketball Championship and still remained V.P. of Student Affairs.”

Quote about a Change Leader



“There is an aliveness and intensity to life. You have to be aware when you're on the edge. You can't sleep walk when you're on the edge.”

Quote from a Change Leader



“First we talked about being leaderless and then we realized we were leaderfull.”

Quote from a Change Leader

Emerging discoveries from the research

An intensive data analysis brought preliminary research findings to the Chaordic Commons Annual Gathering in July of 2003, <http://collectivechaordicspirit.com/phaseonebooklet.pdf>.

Emerging discoveries are:

1. People organize in the zone containing just enough order to deal with inevitable chaos, especially in the early stages of an enterprise.
2. Change leaders stretch to the edge, balancing tenacity with letting go, tapping a complex web of connectedness running across dimensions of people, purpose, principles, practices, process and products.
3. Leadership arises with minimal structure and support for self-organizing practices (like the experience of OST).

We learned about chaordic organizing from those we interviewed, learning to operate chaordically ourselves, unified by our love of learning and each other. We've self-organized our work guided by Collective Chaordic Spirit.

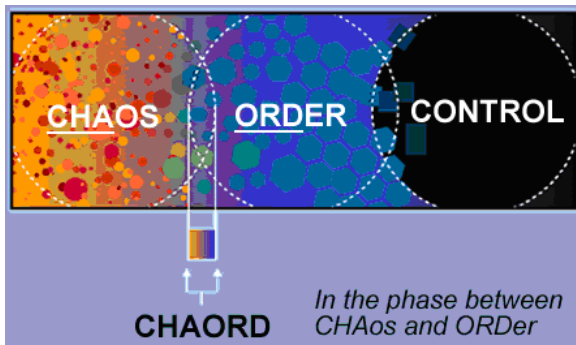
Liberation, Communication and Transformation

Transforming an organization or community requires people free to pursue their interests and apply their skills while caring for the whole. With greater freedom in our organizations

and communities, there is an increased necessity for information flow to keep shared purpose in the foreground. The more we are open to liberation, the more we must engage in skillful communication.

It is over six years since I began blending Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space Technology in whole systems transformation work. Thousands of people in scores of businesses, municipalities, human service organizations and public forums have experienced the liberation and communication resulting from integrating these processes.

As I sip my coffee these days, I ponder the possibilities for using this blend on a larger scale. What if we brought thousands of people together to transform water usage in the Southwest United States? What if convention participants engaged with AI and OST to ask, "What is the world calling for that our organization/field/country can provide?" What if we sought liberation and communication in all our efforts so that we could transcend personalities and tap into the infinite pool of wisdom in the collective consciousness? Ultimately our greatest legacy comes from connecting with others around a life-giving purpose to deliver what is most needed for our evolution. Appreciative Inquiry dancing with Open Space Technology employs the forces of liberation and skillful communication so that collective ideas are manifested to serve the highest good.



Endnote:

¹ The term "chaordic" was coined by Dee Hock, CEO Emeritus of VISA Corporation. chaordic [kay'-ordic], adj, fr. E chaos and order The behavior of any self-governing organism, organization or system that harmoniously blends characteristics of order and chaos. 2. patterned in a way dominated by neither chaos nor order. 3. characteristic of the fundamental organizing principles of evolution and nature.