

AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY MODEL FOR BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

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Around the world NGOs¹, community based organizations, international agencies, governments, universities and donors are discovering an inescapable lesson. The fight against poverty and environmental decline requires new forms of cooperation or *partnerships* that enable diverse constituencies to join forces to meet enormous challenges which none of them can accomplish alone. The difficulty in forging partnerships built on mutual respect and shared goals between Northern and Southern NGOs can scarcely be underestimated, yet neither can its potential importance. Partnerships between international and local organizations are on the rise everywhere--the question is how to make them work in the most mutually developmental and effective ways?

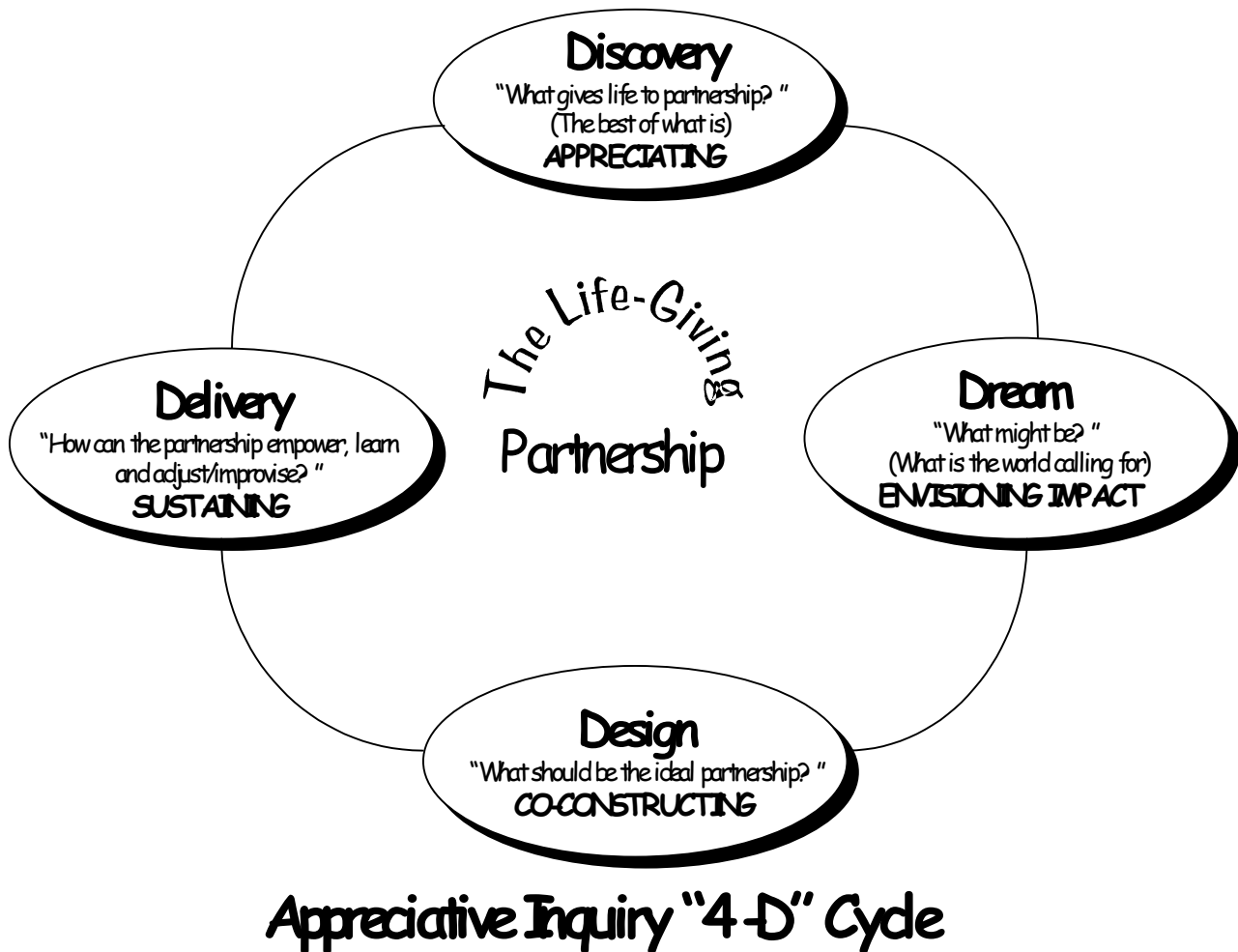
As a step toward addressing this question the GEM Initiative² has partnered with a number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) including Save the Children and CARE in a workshop setting with field staff and their local partners. The purpose of these workshops was to provide a forum to share experiences and techniques of partnering through experienced-based dialogue. The approach centered around an Appreciative Inquiry into the Dynamics of Partnership in order to:

- Discover common ground for partnership
- Experience processes for building authentic partnerships
- Share best practices relating to partnership, and
- Co-create collaborative strategies for the future.

¹ NGO refers to non-governmental organizations involved in relief or economic development activities. Northern NGOs are headquartered in industrialized countries and Southern NGOs are based in developing countries.

² The GEM Initiative is a program of the SIGMA Center at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management. The purpose of GEM is to provide organizational capacity building programs to NGOs.

Having successfully used Appreciative Inquiry in other GEM programs which focused on inquiring into the factors that give life to “organizations”, GEM staff believed that a similar model which inquired into what gives life to “partnership” would uncover new learnings in this domain. To this end, a process previously used in GEM’s Organizational Excellence Program³ was adapted for use in partnerships and became the 4-D Model: Discovery, Dream, Design, Delivery.



³ The Organizational Excellence Program uses the Appreciative Inquiry approach to support management teams from diverse organizations that are ready for growth and change.



At the core of this process is the inquiry which begins and ends with valuing that which gives life to partnerships. The search during this phase of the cycle focuses on what the partnership has done well in the past and is doing well in the present. The inquiry also seeks to dream about and design a better future. The primary task of the **Discovery** Phase is to appreciate the best of “what is” by focusing on peak moments in the life of a partnership-- when people have experienced the partnership relationship as most alive and effective. Seeking to understand the unique factors (e.g., leadership, structures, values, planning methods, etc.) that made the peak moments possible, allows people to let go of points of difficulty in the partnership and focus on and learn from those factors that bring them together. In the **Discovery** Phase people share stories of exceptional accomplishments, discuss life-giving factors of their partnership and highlight the aspects of the partnership’s history that they value and want to preserve in the future. Questions in the inquiry draw out stories which demonstrate characteristics of really good partnerships, the kinds of best qualities and skills of individuals that contribute to good partnership, stages in the development of partnership relations, reasons for forming partnerships and alliances and ways in which partners can learn together.

Some of the key questions which guide the Appreciative Inquiry into Partnership during the **Discovery** Phase are:

1. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN PART OF A REALLY GOOD PARTNERSHIP?

Over the years you and your organization have been in many partnership relationships. As you reflect back over all those experiences, there have been ups and downs, high points and low points, or peaks and valleys as far as the partnership experience was concerned. For the moment focus on a high point--a time you felt you were involved in a really “good” partnership, a time that stands out as significant, meaningful, mutually empowering, or particularly effective in terms of results achieved. Share the story of this good partnership: what made it a good partnership? How were you involved? How did it operate? What were the key learnings?

2. BEST QUALITIES AND SKILLS.

We all have different qualities and skills we bring to any new partnership. Let's reflect on those qualities and skills from different levels:

- (a) **Yourself:** Without being too humble, what is it that you value most about yourself as it relates to *things you bring* to building *high* quality partnerships?
- (b) **Your Society or Culture:** Every society or culture has its own unique qualities, beliefs, traditions or capabilities that prepare us for building good partnership relations. What 2-3 things about your culture or society are you most proud about in relation to qualities that might enhance or help build good partnerships? Can you share a story about your culture that illustrates its best partnership qualities?
- (c) **Your organization:** What, currently, are your organization's best practices, skills values, methods, or traditions that make it ready to be a good partner organization?

3. STAGES OF PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Think about a current partnership relationship between your organization and another organization. Obviously relationships change over time. What, in your view, were the stages of development in the partnership? If you thought about the partnership like a play--with act one, act two, act three, and so on-- what was the key theme or storyline for each act? What were the challenges that your organization had to deal with in building a higher quality partnership? How did you successfully deal with the challenges? Key lessons?

4. WHY BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS?

From your organization's perspective, why go to all the trouble of building partnerships with other organizations? Why not just operate alone? What, in ideal terms, are the benefits and outcomes of forming good partnerships? What are your highest hopes for partnership?

5. CORE “LIFE GIVING” FACTOR.

As you think about what it takes to build high quality partnerships, especially across organizations from different cultures, *what is the core* “life giving” factor in such partnerships without which good partnership would not be possible?

6. WHAT YOU LOOK FOR IN A POTENTIAL PARTNER.

What are your organizational criteria for inviting a partnership relationship with another organization or group? What are the key questions you would ask a new potential partner?

7. PARTNERSHIP LEARNING METHODS.

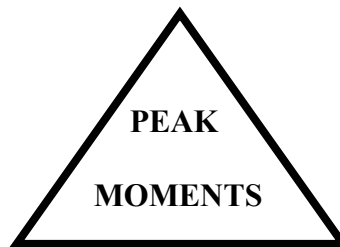
Every good partnership results in organizational learning on the part of both parties. In your experience what are the primary barriers and obstacles to both organizations learning from each other? More importantly, how have those barriers been overcome in your partnership experience? How does your organization approach the teaching/learning process? How do you learn from each other?

When the interviews in pairs are completed, each pair forms a group with 2-3 other pairs and a few of the richest stories are shared with the larger group. This group then focuses on preparing a group list of “best practices” for forming partnerships which came out in the interview stories.

Some examples of these best practices or themes that are common to many of the partnership stories are:

- Having a common vision and being committed to it
- Sharing information and resources
- Transparency and accountability
- Trust, respect and understanding
- Effective communication
- Willingness to take risks
- Willingness to compromise
- Flexibility
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Valuing each others contributions

Through this process of **Discovery** partner teams come to know those moments in their partnership's history that they most value and want to preserve into the future.



The **Discovery** Phase of the 4-D model is full of peak moments for participants. The interview process itself is a deeply moving and empowering act. For many, this is the first time that the partners have talked together about what matters most to each of them. The interviews serve to jump-start an authentic dialogue about partnership and about what each individual brings to and hopes for the joint endeavor.

At the close of these interviews participants are asked to describe what it felt like to be in this kind of a conversation with their partner. Some of the most common reactions are:

- “I was deeply moved by my partner’s stories.”
- “I didn’t know my own value until now.”
- “This was a really freeing conversation.”
- “This really helped me understand my partner better”



The next phase in the Partnership 4-D Model is the **Dream** Phase. During this phase partners are challenged to use the stories and data and best practices about partnership as a launching pad for boldly envisioning what the partnership might become. What is the partnership calling for?

This phase involves challenging the status quo by envisioning more valued and vital futures. The task here is to build a vision of the *impact* the partnership has the potential to achieve. Grounded in the stories uncovered during the earlier inquiry, partners are equipped to fashion a future relationship well beyond the status quo. They are encouraged to be bold and expansive and leave behind any current constraints or obstacles.

During this phase partner teams imagine what impact the partnership will have in their village, in their country, in the world. By so doing they construct a positive image of their shared future. They are directed back to the stories and data that came alive during their interviews; especially question four, when they have identified what their highest hopes are for partnership. A first step in creating this bold dream is to create a collective image of what is happening in the ideal partnership. Partner teams are asked to create a skit, song, mural or some way of communicating, without the written word, a vivid portrayal of their ideal partnership.

The second part of the **Dream** Phase involves putting these dreams into bold statements as if they had already been achieved. Although bold and provocative, this future vision is grounded in examples from the partnership's positive past. These *possibility propositions* are compelling precisely because they are based on extraordinary moments in the partnership's history.

Here are two examples of possibility propositions which were crafted during the **Dream** phase:

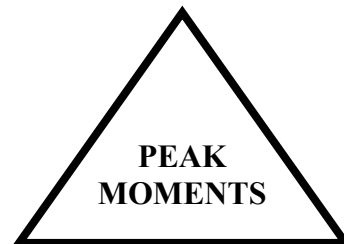
Partnership Possibility Proposition #1

In order to benefit from synergy, maximize impacts, and promote sustainability through viable structures, we are working through diverse types of effective partnerships which are responsive and appropriate to our dynamic operating environment. These partnerships are based on commitment to shared objectives and are characterized by respect and trust, accountability, flexibility, and open communication.

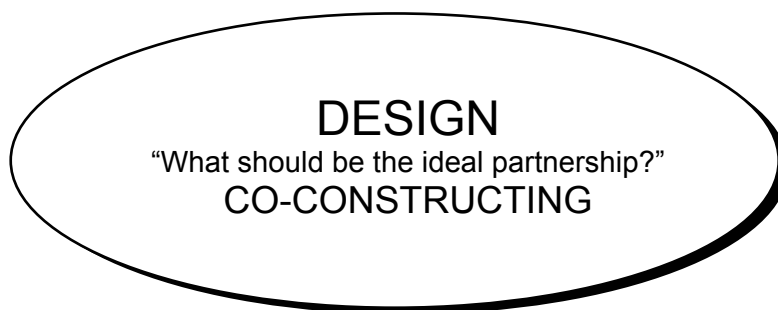
Partnership Possibility Proposition #2

All of our global programs are the result of ongoing collaboration with our organizational partners. Collaboration means that we jointly conceive a vision and create a program that is a learning laboratory for all involved. Primary control of the program is in the hands of those who are most immediately impacted. We consult and advise regularly with each other and make collaborative decisions. Our financial records, planning documents and strategic thinking are open to all partners. We are an open network for all entities and stakeholders who share our values and vision and work to make it a reality.

Having contributed to the creation of these bold and often provocative possibility propositions, people are now ready to move on to the next phase where they will work together to craft reality from their dreams.



The peak moments in the **Dream** Phase are a result of the expansive, “out of the box” thinking which is called for in the creation of both the dream dramatizations and the possibility statements. Each step asks the partner teams to stretch their current aspirations beyond what they see as possible, striving to imagine the “ideal”. In so doing, new ideas and opportunities are uncovered, paving the way for their jointly created future.

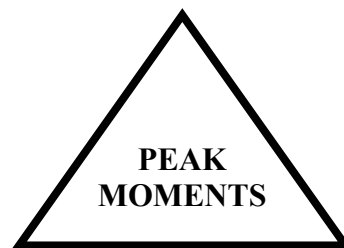


During the **Design** Phase the partner teams move from the image they have constructed together of their desired future relationship and begin to design a “social architecture” which will support their shared dreams. At this point in the workshop it is often useful to offer a morning or a day of Open Space Technology which allows the participants the opportunity to convene conversations of their choosing that can enrich the **Design** Phase. These conversations often bring in additional or more in depth stories of best practices and successes which they wish to keep in mind as they design their future together.

One method for creating a new partnership architecture involved working through a matrix similar to the one presented below. The process drew on the data and themes generated during the **Discovery** Phase, as well as the possibility propositions crafted during the **Dream** Phase. The task here is to design a partnership that is aligned with the jointly held vision and values and come to some agreement on what needs to happen to make the dream a reality. This phase begins to look somewhat similar to more traditional action planning. However, the actions now are firmly rooted in an inquiry into the best of the past and an exploration of the most desired future.

PARTNERSHIP DESIGN MATRIX

	Current Assets	Action	Responsibility	Resources
Policies				
Procedures/ Process				
Structures				
Relationships				

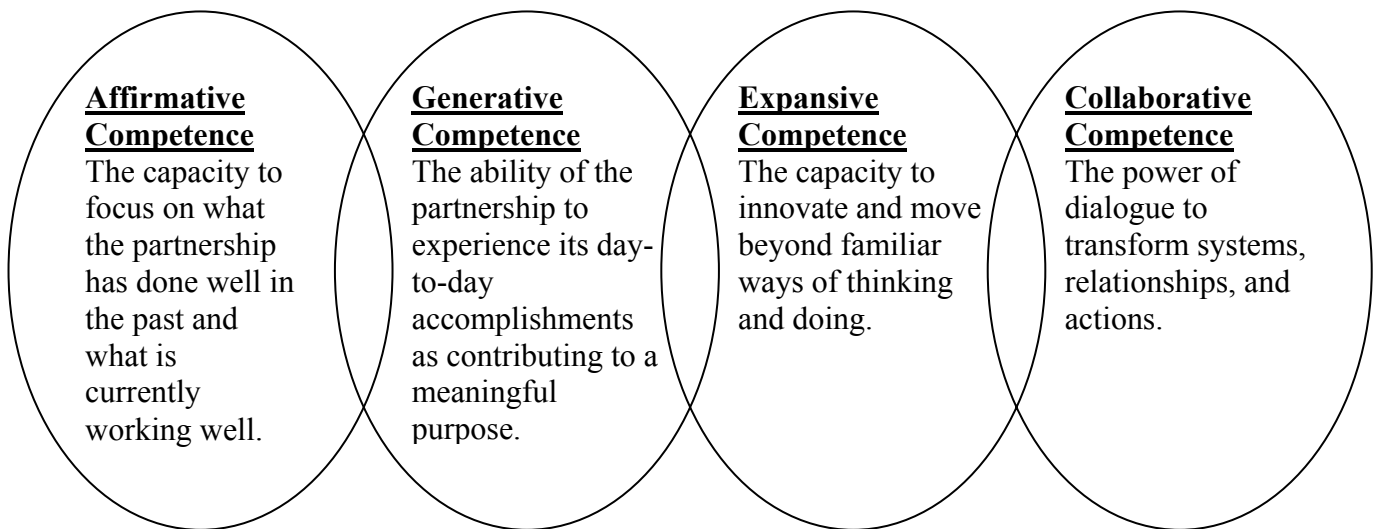


The peak moments during the **Design** Phase grow out of the momentum generated by joint ownership or shared creation translated into concrete action. It is at this point in the process that people are asked to make personal commitments to help grow and sustain the partnership. Having been a part of the earlier conversations about what gives life to partnership, and then contributing to the shared vision of what impact the partnership may make, there is a high level of personal excitement which emerges during the **Design** Phase for re-examining and re-creating the partnership so that its policies and procedures, its structures and relationships, are congruent with the newly envisioned partnership.

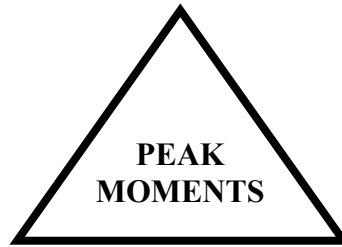


The last phase of the 4-D Cycle, the **Delivery** Phase, introduces the concept of a “learning organization” in which both sides of the partnership are committed to continuous learning, adjustment and innovation in support of their shared vision. The partnership seeks to become its own learning organization where both teams continually expand their capacity to envision and create the results they truly desire-- where new and empowering forms of joint action are designed, and where collective aspiration is set free and all members of the partnership are continually (e)valuating the work they are doing together and learning how to learn together. The key to sustaining the momentum fueled by the shared positive image of the partnership’s future is to build an “appreciative eye” into all the ways of working together which constitute the partnership.

One method for fine tuning the partnership’s appreciative eye is to practice one or more of the following competencies⁴ which support and sustain an on-going learning organization.



⁴ Barrett, Frank (1995) Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures. *Organizational Dynamics*, 24(1), 36-49.



The peak moments in this phase result from the freedom to move forward with an entirely new perspective. The partnership has re-envisioned itself and is free to create a fresh course for shared learning and innovation.

The mere act of working through the phases of the 4-D model--from **Discovery** to **Dream** to **Design** and on to **Delivery** leads the partner teams on a positive, shared journey which celebrates their past successes, creates a joint vision of their future impact and rebuilds their day to day actions in alignment with their mutual discoveries. Having embarked once along this journey, the partnership will be able to revisit the phases whenever necessary, keeping an appreciative eye on the challenges ahead.