

## About Collaborative Inquiry with the Oasis School of Human Relations

### New approaches for new challenges

People in change agent or leadership positions face a time of increasing challenge: about the scale and implications of decisions, about their own practice as change agents and leaders, and about the culture, conduct and ways of working of their organisations. Those decisions and interactions also demand increasing alignment with a variety of progressive and often conflicting forces in the world.

These include:

- scrutiny, transparency and accountability
- demonstrating globally responsible practice: locally, nationally and on a planetary level
- changing conceptions of rights and relationships
- environmental and ecological awareness
- dilemmas involving freedom and accountability
- influence across boundaries without control or ‘power over’.

All these contribute to the complexity change agents and leaders face.

### A Whole Person Learning approach

There is a need for greater innovation across organisations – in how people, not just leaders or champions – are enabled and inspired to face these challenges. Leadership is for everyone, not just those labelled ‘leaders’.

Globally responsible leadership isn’t just about those ‘in charge’.

Ten years ago, Oasis was a founding partner in the establishment of a global initiative for a development focus that has gathered momentum ever since. The following quote was captured as we set the agenda. For globally responsible leader, read ‘all of us’. It calls for all of us to bring more of who we can be to the workplace.

*It is no longer sufficient to rely solely on the cognitive acquisition of knowledge, experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways of learning must be integrated into the globally responsible leader curriculum. In all of these, the human learns not only with his or her rational abilities, but learns by responding with all of his or her senses and abilities (practical, affective, conceptual, imaginal) – a ‘whole person learning’ approach. This involves enabling the globally responsible leader to discover more of their inner dimension, learn from first-hand experiences about the social and environmental consequences of business decisions... and to face the intended and unintended consequences of the choices they make.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> From [Globally Responsible Leadership: A Call for Engagement](#), 2005, Report to the UN Global Compact

## Collaborative Inquiry as an approach to change

Collaborative Inquiry is one form of expression of Whole Person Learning. It is an evolving participative approach to experiential research and is a tool for organisations looking to develop new methods of learning and to encourage new forms of leadership involving everyone.

Human-based inquiry has been under steady development from its inception in the early 1980s. Collaborative Inquiry is the name we give to the particular approach growing out of the international work of Oasis in this area. It is informed by other approaches to inquiry such as Appreciative and Co-operative. It brings more opportunity for challenge than some approaches, and is less personally intense than others. It has been effectively offered in business settings as well as the health sector and as a means of individual development.

### How it works

Individuals respond to a 'call' – the inquiry topic or theme. In an organisational setting the topic is often supported or even shaped by key decision makers, although the details are for the specific group or groups to develop and influence.

The group gather with those initiating the inquiry who outline:

1. The evolution of their interest in the inquiry topic.
2. The way the Collaborative Inquiry method works.
3. The timetable for the inquiry.
4. The key negotiables within the inquiry process, and the givens.

Group members then take some time to clarify any questions or concerns. Commitment is established and the inquiry process gets underway with individuals working out their own angle or focus of interest within the general theme of the inquiry itself. Through discussion and exploration each individual clarifies and refines their question or theme until they recognise they are ready to take it out into the field – their crucible of application.

The group determine, if it is open to negotiation, the extent to which the group as a whole will offer recommendations or organisational-wide findings beyond their individual discoveries and breakthroughs to a wider audience.

Participants outline to themselves through their discussion with others how they intend to monitor their research: what notes or records they will keep, what criteria they are employing and so on. Through collaborative discussion the participants shape what may begin as a relatively vague area of interest into something more tangible and capable of deeper observation and more rigorous and systematic effort.

The participants then return to their sites of action (workplaces) and begin to implement their agreed action cycle over a period of a few weeks. During this time they may engage with other inquiry participants and/or with the inquiry facilitators, as needed.

## Inquiry cycles

At the next meeting the co-researchers share their data, identify what happened, and sift through the raw material of their exploration before deciding on whether to refine the question they have been following, or change it for another related theme. A second inquiry cycle then begins. Identifying the learning from any given cycle often emerges as a result of the dialogue and responses that participants offer one another in the review stage.

Inquiries benefit from approximately five to eight cycles of planning, action, review and assessment. Too few cycles and the process rarely generates data that has real depth; too many and the group is likely to lose the rigour of the process.

At the close of the inquiry cycles the researchers have decisions to make about the results of their work. They may simply retain personal possession of their own research; in a specific organisational context, they may decide to collaborate together on producing some shared documentation; they may use a rapporteur's notes as the basis for an account they all assent to or reserve commitment to; they may use any combination of the above.

Individuals may follow a line of inquiry of their own and refine it over a succession of cycles. They may develop a common question with some or all of the other researchers pooling their findings about the common theme. Or they may follow parallel tracks of different but related themes throughout the inquiry using each other as assistants to refine their work.

## Membership

For significant and focused learning, the inquiry group is limited to 12 participants. They commit to attending the inquiry sessions and work between sessions either individually or with other participants. They can also receive support and coaching from the facilitators.

## Findings

Collaborative Inquiry has four main outcomes:

1. **Personal change** of those taking part – the process is not easy and is a form of experiential development at a significant level.
2. **Presentational** – giving expression to the learning achieved (using traditional forms, or more creative approaches).
3. **Propositional** – individuals may be able to formulate their learning into working arrangements that will inform their practice in clear and desirable ways, in addition to making recommendations to others.
4. **Practical** – the implementation of inquiry learning in the form of day-to-day ways of attitudes, thinking and behaviour.

## The Inquiry Facilitators

The inquiry requires a degree of guidance in relation to the method, especially in the earlier cycles of inquiry. There is a primary facilitator for the process, and a support facilitator. There is usually an external advisor on the Collaborative Inquiry process, and an advisor on the specific content area. Both facilitators are also involved as co-researchers in the inquiry.