

Journey into the Soul of an Organization

by Dave Potter

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with co-authors Tom Peters, Ken Blanchard, Anita Roddick, and Thomas Moore

Almost twenty years ago, my next door neighbor committed suicide. Bruce's violent death shocked and mystified me because he had seemed so well-adjusted. He was outgoing and fun to be around. How could this happen? Why? And why Bruce, of all people? He had never even hinted at anything seriously troubling him - he seemed so easy-going. But, as Sherlock Holmes once pointed out to Dr. Watson, the dog *not* barking is as much a clue as the dog barking. After talking it over with my wife, we realized that the fact that there was no hint of any problems was, perhaps, the major clue to this tragedy. Bruce never, ever, talked about his own personal issues. He could talk non-stop about issues that interested *you*, and he was a wonderful listener, but his inner life was almost uniformly a mystery to all who knew him. It was only when we read the suicide note that it became clear how distraught he had been about his separation with his wife. He had successfully hidden his inner turmoil from everyone around him.

In these times of accelerating technological and social change, many organizations are also in a state of inner turmoil. This condition is common, and yet tremendous energies are expended to hide the unrest and to bury evidence of discord and inconsistency. But, at what cost to the organization and its people? What damage is done when...

...the division head can't tell his own staff the real reason a key manager is being "laid off"?

...the engineering team won't tell management that a project is doomed to failure and, instead, postpone the inevitable by pushing the completion date out further and further, week by week, month by month?

...a manager has so alienated his staff that they are ready to mutiny, and not one of them has mentioned the problem to his face?

...a key worker is so sick of working on the same project, month-in and month-out, she goes home every night and complains of her weariness to her husband but, because she wants to be a "team player," has never mentioned it to her team leader?

Every organization has internal conflict, but it is often buried in company or social protocol. This organizational problem of covering up conflict has deep roots. Maybe it begins with parents telling us that "big boys (girls) don't cry" or "don't tell Aunt Gertrude that you don't like the gift, because she'll be hurt." Our teachers taught us that the penalty for looking like you don't know the answer is to get called on and be embarrassed for not being smart or prepared. Savvy students develop a face and a posture that says, "I'm really here - and I know and understand what you're saying," to hide the fact that they have given up and their minds are many miles away. The people we work with are so skilled at hiding from us what they really think and feel that we may be totally unaware that a key project is about to fall apart. No one wants to look stupid, and no one wants to hint that they don't have it all together. The real problem for the organization is not the conflict, but its unavailability for examination.

“No Problems Here”



Just as we attempt to make our personal lives appear calm and trouble-free, we work very hard to make our organization look like everyone is in sync and pulling in the same direction. For instance:

...the marketing director who reports to the president that the ad campaign is in “great shape”, even though she knows the two product managers are in the middle of a bitter feud over content and creative control and, without the miracle she’s hoping for, it’s likely to be over-budget and late, or...

...the production supervisor who knows there are serious quality problems on one of his lines, but hopes to get it squared away before the upcoming plant inspection.

We may even do such a good job of creating the illusion of unity, harmony, and shared vision that we come to believe it ourselves, and that belief obscures any evidence to the contrary. For instance:

...the CEO who proudly points to the corporate mission statement hung on the wall, but none of the employees outside the executive suite would recognize it as being their own if the company logo weren’t on it.

Jerry Harvey coined the term “Abilene Paradox” to describe the situation where a group goes, collectively, someplace no one individual wants to go, not because of peer pressure or “group tyranny,” but because no-one is willing to risk telling their personal truth. It’s like the idea presented at a strategy meeting that no one believes is feasible, but there isn’t anyone who will risk saying so out loud. Because each member of the strategy team is so skilled at hiding what they really think and feel, when they look around the table, it looks as though all the rest think it’s a good idea. So each of them thinks “maybe they know something I don’t know” and, out of fear of looking stupid or being challenged, no one says anything and a bad idea goes forward. It’s well-documented that this is how we got ourselves into the Bay of Pigs fiasco during the Kennedy era, and how the Watergate break-in got authorized during the Nixon administration. In both these cases, the majority of the presidential advisors each thought, privately and independently, that the proposals were bad, perhaps even insane, but they said nothing.

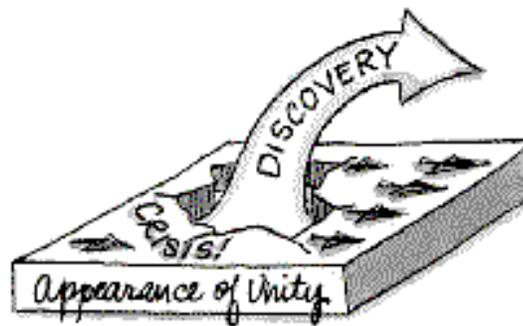
When asked about the major problems in his organization, a vice-president once told me that the biggest problem was the president’s tendency to compulsively micro-manage. It seemed to him that every important document leaving the company was reviewed and red-lined, sometimes going through five or six cycles before the president approved it. He said, “It’s driving us all nuts! Why doesn’t he just do it himself?!?” He then said, almost in a whisper, that “Everyone in the company knows his micro-management is a problem.” When asked, “*Everyone?!?*,” he paused for just an instant and then exclaimed with the shock of realization, “Well, you can’t tell the *President!*”

Admittedly, it takes great personal courage to address issues directly to those we are in conflict with. It takes even greater skill to do it in a way that doesn’t end with negative and unresolved feelings. It’s uncomfortable and scary. We fear that our co-workers, our managers, or our

employees will ask us questions we can't or don't want to answer and that it might turn into an ugly scene, with strong and differing points of view. So, when we talk about the troubling issues we have with our co-workers or the company, we normally only do it in safety, with like-minded colleagues and friends, and not with the people who most need to hear it.

This unspoken and unconscious collusion *not* to express what's really going on is a fundamental problem in organizations. How many times have you been to a long, lifeless meeting, and the moment it ends, people gather into sub-groups and only then begin to say, with great animation, what they really think and feel? Without somehow getting beyond the facade of "we've got it all together," there is no hope of the organization to discover its essence, its soul, and to tap the power and creativity of its membership.

The Gift of Crisis: Discovery

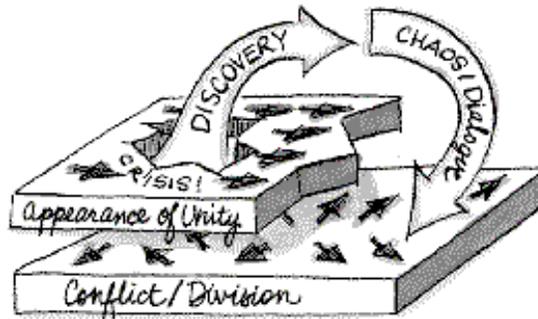


In spite of all our efforts to keep up appearances, inevitably a crisis presents itself which cannot be ignored. The Chinese word for crisis is "wei-ji," and is represented by pairing, side by side, the symbols for danger (wei) and opportunity (ji). The danger of ignoring the crisis or applying a quick-fix, without understanding the underlying dynamics, is that an even larger crisis will result later - and we might not even recognize it as being related to the first! The opportunity the crisis presents is one of discovery, and the rejuvenation and transformation that results if the call to awakening is truly heeded.

In the spring of '95, early on a Monday morning, one of my key employees called me into the conference room and, with explosive emotion, told me that he couldn't stand the way he was treated by me and my staff. After a tense and emotional discussion, there seemed to be no possibility of reconciliation. In a final flourish, Matt walked out the door saying, "I've had it - I quit!" Not once in my twenty years of management, had I ever had anyone quit in anger. This was more than a little upsetting and it caused me to question my ability as a manager and my effectiveness in my work with other organizations. If you had asked me five minutes before if there were any serious inter-personal problems on my staff, I would have said "no." Although Matt had experienced some difficulties with some of his co-workers in the past, I had no idea how bad things really were. As a consequence, Matt's outburst had punched a serious hole right in the middle of my illusion of a smoothly operating corporate machine.

Initially, my staff viewed the incident as "Matt's problem" and his temperamental inability to deal with the inevitable periods of stress in our fast-paced environment. Since it looked to them like an isolated incident, upsetting the calm and efficiency of the rest of the office, it was easy to blame Matt for the ensuing chaos in our office. My business colleagues advised me to get Matt out of there as fast as I possibly could, preferably that same day, before he did any more damage. The logical thing to do was to quickly patch the hole, begin looking for a replacement, and get back to business.

Into the Abyss: Chaos & Dialogue



But we didn't do the logical thing. Instead of simply closing up the hole, we dug deeper and entered a stage of group development author M. Scott Peck calls "chaos" in his community-building model. Here, individual differences surface, opposing perceptions and viewpoints are presented and defended, and emotions run high. This is tricky and dangerous territory, and most groups have difficulty here, because they see only two ways out of the chaos. They either...

- (1) avoid appearance of differences, soften opinions, or retreat altogether, or...
- (2) advance into the chaos, with egos blaring, and those with the greatest powers of personal and social persuasion sway the course.

In the first case, the truth is not told, and critical information is lost, regressing the group back to the level of appearances and denial, with no possibility of learning. In the second case, struggle, power plays, and cacophony prevail, and one or more sub-groups become alienated. A less than optimal resolution.

There is a third way, however - powerful, but not easy. It requires moving into the area of disagreement and conflict, but with an attitude of curiosity, rather than determining who is right. It's like the Zen method of dealing with pain by bringing awareness *into* the pain, instead of away from it: Is it constant or throbbing, sharp or dull, hot or cold? Exactly where is it located? What shape does it have, does the position or extent change? It's a technique designed to substitute curiosity in place of the impulse to run away from the pain, and to expand awareness to include and understand the source of the pain.

This third way involves "dialogue," a way of exploring and communicating not commonly practiced in our culture. Popularized by the late physicist David Bohm, dialogue, in this context, has a meaning distinct from the usual meaning of a discussion where different viewpoints are debated and defended. Through dialogue, the collective intelligence and experience of the group are manifested in creative and unexpected ways, in contrast to the more common outcomes of negotiated compromise or majority rule. Although it's beyond the scope of this essay to enumerate the principles of dialogue, they are described in Peter Senge's Fifth Discipline Fieldbook and in David Bohm's On Dialogue. In his essay, "Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking," William Isaacs, of DIA-logos, Inc. and the MIT Organizational Learning Center, says:

Physicist David Bohm has compared dialogue to superconductivity. In superconductivity, electrons cooled to very low temperatures act more like a coherent whole than as separate parts. They flow around obstacles without colliding with one another, creating no resistance and very high energy. At higher temperatures, however, they begin to act like separate parts, scattering into a random movement and losing momentum.

Particularly when discussing tough issues, people act more like separate, high-temperature electrons. Dialogue seeks to help people attain high energy and low friction without ruling out differences between them. Negotiation tactics, in contrast, often try to cool down interactions by bypassing the most difficult issues and narrowing the field of exchange to something manageable. They achieve "cooler" interactions, but lose energy and intelligence in the process. *In dialogue, the aim is to create a special environment in which a different kind of relationship among the parts can come into play - one that reveals both high energy and high intelligence.*

To address Matt's departure and to begin the dialogue process, we called an impromptu staff meeting. Although it would have been desirable to have Matt participate, he was not available and some of his co-workers felt strongly that they wanted to meet without him. Using principles drawn from David Bohm's work and the modern practitioners of dialogue, we explored unexamined perceptions, unstated assumptions, and unvoiced convictions. We probed the dynamics underlying Matt's blow-up:

What assumptions had we made about Matt and the cause of his resignation?

Was it truly an isolated instance, or was it indicative of deeper problems in our group?

What did it mean about us, individually and collectively, that an important set of work relationships were nearing the point of collapse, and we weren't aware of it?

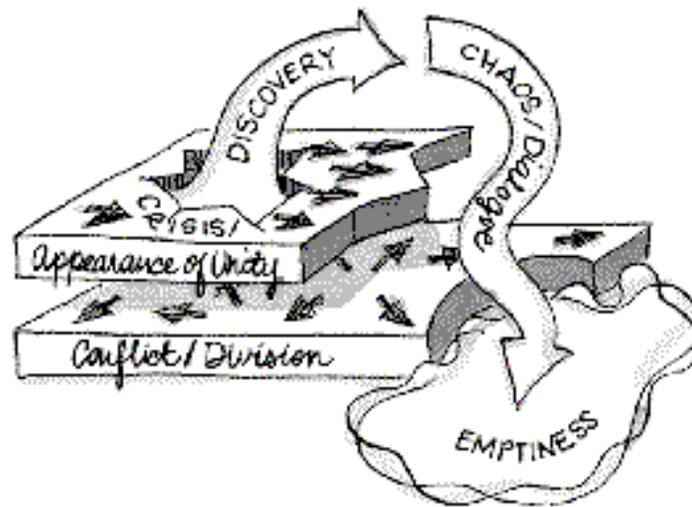
What were the lessons embedded in this event?

This was an uncomfortable examination. It was difficult for me personally, because I had always taken special pride in how well our group worked together. People had often commented on the cheerful and cooperative, yet productive, environment that permeated the office. What had happened?

Through this dialogue meeting and other conversations, many of which did involve Matt, we began to realize that Matt's eruption was not his problem alone, but symptomatic of something deeper. The members of the group started to look to themselves to see what part they each might have played. To our dismay, things began to get worse rather than better, and we started to treat each other with even *less* respect than normal. In truth, the situation wasn't really any worse now than just before Matt announced he was quitting - we simply hadn't noticed before, and now we couldn't hide it. Underneath our illusory "appearance of unity", a whole layer of distrust and conflict had jumped into our awareness.

We began to recall the events of the previous nine months. We could identify many instances of under-cutting and under-mining, but we hadn't really been conscious of them until now. Yes, now that we thought about it, sometimes we did roll our eyes nearly to the back of our heads when Matt talked. And, we occasionally did it with each other, too. A clique had formed that went to lunch together after the weekly tech meetings, and certain members of the technical staff were never invited. Many examples of reduced efficiency and lack of coordination suddenly came to mind. An air of distrust, second-guessing, and rivalry had crept into the office, *and we hadn't paid attention to the signs because it didn't fit our image of who we were as a group.* Now, with Matt's blow-up and our probing deeper, things looked worse than ever before. It seemed as though we'd never recover.

We give up: Emptiness and Surrender



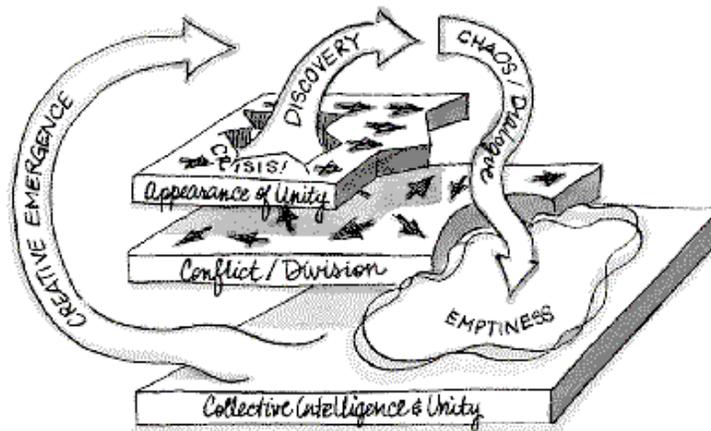
How well we treated each other was a key part of our corporate identity and our organization seemed to be falling apart with the new awareness that we often didn't treat each other with respect. We were often working at cross-purposes. We didn't know what to do. Everything had been said and there still didn't seem to be any sign of resolution. There was no escaping it - we weren't the organization we thought we were. And creating a corporate resolve that we simply begin to treat each other better and cooperate more willingly seemed pointless and futile, like forcing a five year-old to say "I'm sorry" to his brother, when he doesn't really feel it. We had no answer. Maybe we really were just too different to work effectively together.

At the previous level of chaos and instability, there had been a search for "the answer" that would deliver us from the discomfort of fully experiencing the roots of the problem. As long as we feverishly held on to the hope that there would be delivery from the chaos with a simple answer or by selecting one of the many contradictory points of view as the "right" one, there was no hope of moving beyond this stage. In fact, to the degree that we tried to force our way out was the degree that we were ineffective at moving further. One by one, individuals in the group realized that, indeed, *no-one had the answer and, paradoxically, each point of view was valid within the experience of the individual.* There seemed to be "No Exit" - we were stuck and going nowhere. There was nothing to do but to give up. We were deep in the stage M. Scott Peck calls "emptiness" in his community-building model.

If chaos is uncomfortable, this stage of truly not knowing, is by far the most difficult - the organizational equivalent of the "dark night of the soul." Paradoxically, it is in this state of emptiness that we are closest to the soul of the organization. By working through the level of chaos and individual differences using the tools of inquiry and dialogue, a deep knowledge of the group develops, even though no one individual knows what to do with this new awareness.

"There ain't no answer. There ain't ever going to be an answer. There never was an answer. That's the answer." Gertrude Stein

Out of the Emptiness: Creative Emergence



Out of the blue, and without us being prepared for any positive fallout from Matt's quitting, signs of renewed connection began appearing, like crocuses popping through in the spring: Jeff announced that he would no longer attend these exclusive "tech" lunches. Non-exclusive lunches after the tech meetings were OK, but they'd be open to anyone who wanted to come. Some of the insensitive looks that occasionally went across the conference table at tense moments disappeared. Even Matt, who had seemed on the verge of doing something vengeful and destructive on his exit, extended his two week notice to three, and worked evenings and week-ends to complete the projects he'd been working on. He did this even though it meant no extra pay, and even though he would still be out of a job at the end of the three weeks.

Something magical had happened, and it had come unexpectedly. Like a leaderless flock of birds turning as one in the sky, we had spontaneously re-formed ourselves and moved to a higher level of organizational effectiveness and well-being.

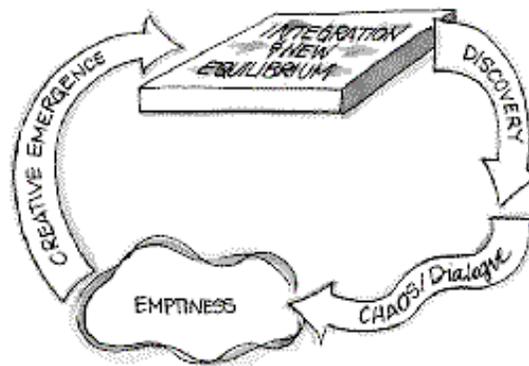
What happened? After giving up all hope and without mandating a change in our behavior, we had changed. Why? David Bohm once said, "the act of observing thought changes it." Instead of immediately instituting damage control, we had explored the meaning of the disruption and ensuing chaos. We honestly and openly observed ourselves, using the principles advocated by dialogue practitioners such as Bill Isaacs and David Bohm. As difficult and uncomfortable as it was to stay with the process, the resolution presented itself spontaneously and unexpectedly, in its own way and time.

We found that below the layer of apparent unity and that of conflicting energies, was one of collective wisdom, unity, and deep inter-connectedness. At this level, after moving through emptiness, the group begins to think as one. Ideas and observations that emerge come as expressions of the group's collective wisdom, informed by the group's previous experience of self-discovery during the earlier stages of chaos and emptiness. *The very differences that were divisive during the stage of chaos and conflict provide harmony, energy, and power at this deepest level.* This level of underlying unity was, and is, always there, but it is typically obscured by the cloak of apparent unity and the noise of unacknowledged conflict.

We had moved through the four phases of *discovery-chaos-emptiness-emergence*, each with their own dangers and possibilities, and into the fifth stage of *integration*, where the fruits of the emergence are incorporated into the learning of the organization¹:

1. **Discovery** - New awareness, precipitated by crisis (or inquiry).
2. **Chaos/Dialogue** - Conflict and differences exposed, exploration through dialogue.
3. **Emptiness** - Group and individual "giving up," surrender to collective intelligence.
4. **Creative Emergence** - Spontaneous, creative, and transformative direction.
5. **Integration** - New equilibrium at a higher level.

Continuing the Journey Cycles of Discovery



Were this a fairy tale, we could end this story with "and the organization lived happily ever after." We had, indeed, reached a new level of cooperation and productivity but, in life and business, nothing is permanent. Our new equilibrium was shattered by events in the marketplace that forced us to realize that our products were lacking in some serious ways. This crisis initiated a new cycle of chaos, followed by dialogue and the painful emptiness of not knowing what to do. Again, after giving up the idea that there might be an easy solution, creative and productive ideas and events emerged out of nowhere, making the company, people, and products stronger than they ever were before. Of course, even this was not the last chapter, with new events later disrupting our new equilibrium, and subsequent renewal and growth.

There's no guarantee of making it even once through the *discovery-chaos-emptiness-emergence-integration* cycle, much less multiple times, since there are powerful counter-forces at each stage. The paralyzing effect of unexpected crisis, the pain and confusion of looking deeper into the underlying dynamics, the discomfort of being in emptiness and "not knowing," the inability to incorporate transformational insights, all militate against the organization completing the cycle of growth and renewal.

If the growth is allowed to continue, the cycle winds around and around, in an expanding spiral. Each time, the organization emerges from emptiness, integrates all that it has learned about itself and finds greater unity and expanded effectiveness. Of course, in time, this new knowledge will become calcified, and new events will give the organization the opportunity to grow and adapt.

In a skilled and experienced group, able to withstand the confusion of chaos and frustration of emptiness, the full cycle can appear even in individual meetings, where particularly important and

¹ This model owes a great debt to other formulations such as M. Scott Peck's community-building model and those of the modern practitioners of dialogue, including Bill Isaacs of DIA-logos, Inc. and the MIT Learning Center. Students of Scott Peck will recognize "Chaos" and "Emptiness" and dialogue practitioners will recognize "Creative Emergence" as "Creativity in the Field."

difficult issues are being addressed. For instance, look for chaos, emptiness, and emergence in this description by Tom Portante, a futurist for Andersen Consulting:

I was reminded of times in our meetings where lots of people are calling out ideas, where it seems that there can be little (if any) common ground in a room full of bright, opinionated and ego-strong participants. At first, it looks like the usual verbal warfare where one person makes an argument, the others listen for weak spots and sites for flanking maneuvers. What invariably happens, after false starts, after a general rapport has developed in the room, after rises and falls in levels of frustration and anxiety, and with a lot of skillful verbal navigational aides by the group's facilitator - is something remarkable. It's as if some of the people are saying *'the answer is 2,'* others are saying *'no, the answer is 6,'* still others, *'no, it's 5,'* and everyone is looking for guidance as to which one is The Right Answer. After a while, there comes the uncomfortable acceptance of the inevitability of an impasse. We may hear a wearisome comment like, *'well, I guess we can all live with 2,'* but, somehow, the group neither accepts the compromise nor disbands. Then, unexpectedly, the conversation develops a different cadence, a different rhythm. What tends to happen is that people stop focusing their attention on the most recent speaker's comments and begin addressing some of the underlying assumptions that exist to frame a number of specific conversational threads. What brings a smile to my face is when the conversation moves away from the obvious compromises, to a spirited exchange that allows us to leave the table with a near-unanimous decision that, indeed, *the answer is neither 2, nor 6, nor 5, but rather, 16 1/2.* The creativity that came up with this new answer is hard to isolate - we often don't even remember who in the group suggested the thread that led to a transformation in thinking.

Summary

The journey into the soul of an organization, into its collective intelligence and underlying unity, is not a trip for the faint-hearted or those looking for quick-fixes. It is sometimes painful, sometimes glorious and mysterious, has no final destination and, at each stage, there are strong forces acting against progression to the next phase. In fact, most organizations only rarely move through and beyond chaos and, instead, collapse back into the illusion of unity and solidarity.

When a group is in chaos and is beginning to explore its differences, there is a deep fear - a fear that if the group goes any deeper, it will descend into a bottomless tangle of conflicting egos and unresolvable forces. It's an area of the unknown, with personal beliefs, convictions, and world-views that are normally only indirectly expressed. The result of fully and openly exploring this level is paradoxical and is best expressed by M. Scott Peck: *"If you let a group experience its differences, it will actually come together rather than fall apart."*

Even when there is progression through chaos and emptiness, to creative emergence and integration, it is often by accident, with little learning about how to negotiate these territories the next time. In this era of "permanent whitewater," as Peter Vaill likes to call the continual and constant sea of change around us, can we afford to leave our responses to the inevitable crises to chance? Further, do we need to wait for a crisis to discover the magic that happens when a group becomes more than had previously seemed possible, and its collective mind and soul emerge?

The practitioners of dialogue and community-building provide powerful tools for tapping into the ever-present collective, intentionally and consciously, without waiting for the next crisis. Still, it requires courage to move through conflict and chaos, and faith to step into emptiness and the unknown. Although it is a sometimes scary and difficult journey, it is rewarded by those times when the organization transcends the abilities of its individual members, and becomes something far more than the sum of its parts.

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