Zen and the Art of Wraparound Maintenance
Developing the Inner-Game of Strength-Based Support and Assistance

By John Franz and Patricia Miles

"You have studied well, Grasshopper. There is nothing more I can teach you."
(Some bald monk in a "Kung Fu" flashback)

No one could believe the news. Apollina Smith was leaving Kenyon County. Rumors abounded, but no one was sure what lay behind her decision to take a job with a new project in another county. Was it true she'd been forced out because of other people's jealousy over the success of her wraparound project? Who was spreading the nasty stories about Apollina and the clinical director at one of county's non-profit agencies? Whatever the reason, she was on her way out and the county was in an uproar. Her own staff was numb. On the other hand, folks who had never been comfortable with the new approach were saying things like, "Well, it had a good run, but in the end that wraparound thing was just another fad."

Carol Hartwig sat in Apollina's office. She was one of the few people who knew why her friend was leaving, but that wasn't her biggest concern. Apollina was asking her to take over the operation of the Collaborative.

"But I'm a probation officer. You need a mental health specialist or something. And besides, given what you've had to go through, why should I step into the line of fire?"

"Because maybe you'll be better at ducking than I was. Because it's the biggest challenge in town. Because people need to see wraparound as more than one person's philosophy. And because I thought you'd do anything to get out of that cubicle you share with Bob."

"Is it always this hard to get an office of your own?"

"You mean feeling like to get in the door you've got to step over the body of the last occupant?"

"It is kind of uncomfortable."

"Welcome to middle management."

Paddle to the sea, little ones

New projects of any sort usually have a short half-life, dictated only in part by the grants that got them started. In some ways they are like sea turtles. The mother turtle lumbers up onto the beach, digs a hole in the sand and leaves dozens of small, round eggs. Sometime later, launched by the appropriate phase of the moon, the new turtles emerge and start their chaotic rush to the ocean. Getting to the water is hard enough, but as the little tykes splash into the waves, the real battle begins. Predators, bad luck and poor decisions doom most of them. But a few make it and the Earth has a new generation of turtles.

The Kenyon County Cooperative had made it as far as the ocean, but now it was going to need some heavy-duty paddling to stay alive. Fortunately, unlike turtles (whose survival depends mostly on chance and individual initiative) people implementing community change efforts like

wraparound have the option of working together to overcome the dangers of the deep. What does it take to keep the dream alive through major changes in an organization? And when the sharks are swarming, how you can tell your friends from the smiling predators who are secretly trading recipes for turtle stew?

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon suggest that the answer lies in looking beyond the obvious, in learning to see the patterns hidden in the apparent chaos that is assaulting your project, and in discovering the defensive and self-defeating behaviors in our own responses to these problems. In a recent update of a classic book they co-authored, Argyris and Schon outline two distinct ways of seeing and learning and demonstrate how moving from the first approach to the second can improve an individual's and an organization's chances of survival.[1] In this article we will adapt a few of their ideas and show how they can be used to help collaborative efforts like wraparound stay afloat.

Wheels within wheels

The two learning models described by Schon and Argyris correspond to two worldviews. The first, which most of us use most of the time, is linear and defensive. At this level, cause and effect are straightforward and unrelenting. Looking any deeper into things will give you headaches and could cause you to loose your head altogether. The approach focuses on winning over losing, avoiding embarrassment and smoothing over problems.

Model two learning seeks to expose the complex network of driving forces contributing to the circumstances and events we see. When we are using a second level approach, we start asking "why" more often than a three-year-old bent on driving her parents over the edge. We test both our own and other's hidden assumptions and attributions about each other. This approach focuses on correcting the mismatches between what we say and what we do through productive reasoning, validating hypotheses and reducing defensiveness.

Each approach has its uses and limitations for organizational improvement. Model one is used to improve the mechanics of the system's current arrangement. It emphasizes the what instead of the why. When problems develop, only a single feedback loop is engaged for inquiry. Model one learning will keep a ship on course, but will have difficulty setting a new course - let alone redesigning the ship itself. This level draws on the strengths of concrete, task-oriented managers and staff.

Model two applies a double loop analysis to examine both the immediate circumstances surrounding an event and the wider context in which the event occurred. As such, this approach draws on the strengths of visionary leaders and participants and focuses on changing actions and structures by changing values and deepening commitments.

One of the biggest limitations of second level learning is that it is so hard to maintain. Argyris and Schon have been trying to teach it to high functioning organizations all around the world for more than 20 years and they have yet to find a place where this approach has been sustained over an extended period of time. Instead, model two approaches tend to be strategies we use when all else fails. If pounding on the engine with a hammer and cursing in several languages won't make the car start, sometimes we have to grit our teeth, take a step back, and figure out what the problem really is.

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[1] Argyris, Chris and Donald Schon. (1996). *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method and Practice.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Another difficulty with using the second level is that it takes time. If you are a baby turtle two zigs away from dropping out of the gene pool and into the food chain, you have to rely on reflexes rather than insight. On the other hand, if it feels like you are spending your whole life zigging and zagging, at some point you may want to check out the bigger picture.

Life in the fast lane

After her meeting with Apollina, Carol came back to the cubicle she shared with Bob Lewis. Bob was an employee of the mental health system who started out as a solo child and family team facilitator in Kenyon County's wraparound project. As the challenges related to developing strength-based plans for families with kids in the juvenile justice system became more evident, the project recognized the need for blended expertise in this area. Eventually, after Carol and Bob had worked together informally to help a child and family with particularly complex needs, they became the first co-located cross-system team in Kenyon County. Although Carol was 10 years older than Bob, they formed a good team and brought a good balance to child and family team meetings.

Bob, who had become the detail person of the team, was pounding away on a court report from a team meeting when Carol stepped in. He looked up expectantly from the keyboard. "So, did you get the inside story?"

"Depends on what you mean by inside."

"Why is she leaving."

Carol looked reflective. She shook her head, then said, "I guess you can say the basic problem was politics."

"Did she give any hint about who was going to take over?"

"We talked about it a little bit."

Carol turned her desk chair around and sat down.

"Bob, she asked me to take over as supervisor."

Carol could see the play of emotions across the face of her young partner. After a couple of attempts at getting a sentence started, Bob said meekly, "Is that something you want to do?"

"Hell no," Carol said forcefully. But before Bob could mistake her point, she added, "But I'm worried about who might take over if I don't do it."

Carol remembered the first time a good partner had left the probation department. Somehow it had almost been worse than when she divorced her husband. Having someone you trust in the next desk made coming to work and dealing with the ocean of crap that floated in every morning bearable. She could see the look of abandonment on Bob's face.

The wonderful world of management

Moving wraparound from the initiation stage to widespread implementation takes savvy supervisors. Too often our efforts at system change consist mainly of short-term training for direct service staff. This is useful, but it has limited impact. The primary place where long term organizational learning and expertise resides is in the memories and skills of an organization's supervisors and managers and those staff who stick around more than a couple of years.

For this reason we should increase the training and support we offer to managers and supervisors in integrated service projects. While part of that training should emphasize first level issues like the day to day operational aspects of wraparound, another part should relate to second level issues and skills.

Within this second area, one of the toughest lessons to learn is how to deal with attacks on the project as it grows over time. The political skills needed to survive in changing organizational environments are difficult to teach. If you ask a grizzled veteran how they held on over five or ten years of battles, they will often say something like, "I did what I had to do, when I had to do it." Or, "I guess it was just dumb luck." There is a random, baby-turtle-making-it-to-the-sea aspect that can't be analyzed. However, second level inquiry can help by exposing and categorizing some of the driving forces behind the conflict and illuminating pathways for resolution.

Battle plans

Carol met Apollina for dinner that night.

"I still don't see why you don't just fight these guys. It feels like you are giving up."

"That's because I am giving up."

"But why? The Collaborative works. Kids and families nobody could help are doing great. We're saving real money in out of home placement costs. Folks come from all over the state to see what we're doing. The county board isn't going to drop the program just because Henry Jones is whining about his agency's lost funding and spreading false rumors about you."

"Maybe it's just that I'm 54 years old and don't have the energy for another one of these battles."

Carol paused and looked at Apollina. Her friend didn't look defeated.

"That's not it."

"Of course not. I'd like nothing better than to cut Henry off at the knees. And I think I could probably do it. But he's put me in an interesting situation. The county board resolution creating the Collaborative is up for renewal and about to be rewritten. You may not believe it, but Henry has a lot of friends on the board. And some of them don't care that much about our little project. It's just one of many they will vote on. Every project that entails as much money as ours needs a champion to get it through the board process. That should be my job. Because Henry can't find an opening to attack the project directly, he's decided to go after me instead. This is an age-old tactic. It creates a messy fight, but it also gives him several ways of winning. The board could believe him or pretend to believe him and drop it because of my alleged misconduct. They could also decide that the thing is just too messy and drop it for no reason. Or, and I think this is the way it would go, they could modify the terms of the contract just enough to make it something he could say his agency could do, and shift the budget over to him. He wouldn't go to this much trouble just to stop the Collaborative. He wants the money for himself."

"So by resigning, you're giving it to him without a struggle."

"Maybe, but I don't think so. This other job is a plum. So it doesn't look like I'm leaving with my tail between my legs. If anything, the Kenyon Board will feel like Lake County has stolen me away. But the main thing is that he assumes I think just like him, that I want the Collaborative as

part of my empire. So he has all the guns pointed at me. I move on to a better job and not only do his allegations lose weight, his target is out of play."

"But who will the new champion be? I don't have any clout with the board."

"That's the good news. I'd rather see the Collaborative disappear than the have Henry take it over. But for some reason my boss has finally seen the light. He's willing to pick up the work on moving the resolution through, and will even turn in some of his personal chits to make it happen. All he wants is to have someone left in charge that he can count on. Namely you."

Carol picked half-heatedly at her steak.

"I can't believe our county is this messed up."

Apollina grinned, but took some time to work on her Chicken Kiev before she answered.

"Carol, this is a good county. If you want to see messed up, you should see the place I'm going. The games they're playing make Kenyon look like Camelot."

"So you're jumping…"

"You got it. Bye bye frying pan. Hello fire. It'll be fun. And this way I leave the Collaborative still standing."

Analyzing the points of conflict

The wraparound approach is a cluster of innovations that are implemented at the practice, program, inter-agency and community levels. The stages of growth that wraparound follows will vary in each community, based on the strengths and needs of the community, the partnerships from which the impetus to adopt wraparound first arises and the broader patterns of climate and culture among the county or state's human service organizations.

As was the case in Kenyon County, these patterns are in constant flux. Sometimes widespread support might be offered, other times aggressive opposition develops. When service integration efforts like wraparound are small, they can stay under the radar. By not attracting much attention beyond that of the families and organizations most directly involved, they avoid the sort of high-profile controversy that cost Apollina her job.

But in the process of scaling up to reach the capacity needed to serve all of the families in the community with complex needs, the visibility of the effort is bound to increase. And as the project becomes easier to spot, it also becomes a bigger target.

Possibilities for derailing wraparound occur at all of the stages of implementation, although issues at the earlier stages tend not to generate the fireworks that go off later on. The first stage of risk is shortly after the introduction of the new approach. If only a few wild-eyed innovators pick it up, the project will stall. The second occurs when the opinion leaders in the mainstream staff begin trying it out. If these early adopters aren't able to redefine and restructure the model to increase its local relevance, applicability and usefulness, wraparound will falter and die. Once these two hurdles have been overcome, somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the staff in the participating organizations will be using the approach and maybe a hundred or more families will be supported. The participating organizations will have begun to adapt their internal structures and their relationships with one another to accommodate the new way of doing business.

This is the point where the model is at its greatest risk of attack, both from within and without. Up until this level of implementation, wraparound will have existed only as an adjunct, a special kind of pilot project shared by some of the organizations in a community, but it will still be a sideshow. The underlying structures, operations and values of the system will not have been significantly affected. Once the time comes to adjust structures and values to accommodate broader implementation, the natural defense mechanisms all organizations and systems acquire to survive and maintain stability are going to be triggered.

Applying Aryris and Shon's rubric helps to deal more objectively to what amounts to an organizational immune response to an onset of wraparound fever. First level thinking relies on making assumptions and attributions about the actions and character of others. Thus, Carol might assume that Henry Jones is a man of evil intent who wants to destroy the Collaborative in order to bring more money into his own organization. She doesn't know Henry, she's never heard directly from him why he's doing the things he's doing. Because of her own interest in the outcome, she doesn't consider that he may be acting out of a belief that the way his organization operates is better for children and families. She may or may not be right about Henry, but from the perspective of Argyris and Schon, the important thing is that her hypothesis has never been adequately tested.

At the second level the question becomes what are the driving forces behind his attack? For projects at this stage of implementation, these forces are likely to include fear generated by uncertainty about how existing mainstream organizations and staff will fit into the new structures being created by wraparound. Faced with a choice between the status quo and an ambiguous new model that may be hard for them to picture, many people will choose the devil they know and put considerable effort into fighting the new devil.

Surviving this attack requires effort at both the first and second level. A fight's a fight, and Apollina has to deal with what Henry is throwing at her as best she can, regardless of why he's throwing it. But she also has to figure out what she can do to get beyond the conflict and achieve some longer-term stability for the implementation of wraparound.

Tonight we deserve some dessert

Apollina ordered her favorite, carrot cake covered with thick, sweet cream cheese topping. Carol gave into her baser instincts and ordered a triple chocolate tart.

"So. Will you take over the Collaborative?"

"I guess so. But you will be getting a whole bunch of phone calls."

"No problem. But you're going to be getting some in return. My biggest battle in Lake County is going to be with a Neanderthal they have running the juvenile probation department."

"Clem? No problem. He's a cupcake."

"If you say so." Apollina took a big bite of dessert, savored the calories, then continued. "While you're in the midst of chocolate intoxication, I might as well tell you what your first big job is going to be after the county board renews the Collaborative's charter and budget."

"What's that."

"You have to give Henry a subcontract."

Carol began to sputter, then realized that she would be wasting good chocolate. She took time to swallow and then politely asked Apollina if she was out of her mind.

"That goes without saying, Grasshopper, but you've still got to mend those bridges. Henry must be brought back from the dark side."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing he has some really good staff, and a program that has helped a lot of people over many years. For another thing, wraparound is never going to survive in Kenyon without his support. But for that to happen, it's got to make sense to him. There's no chance he would ever listen to me, but you've got a chance. Find a place where his people can help. For example, I think his agency could really make a difference with families where one or both of the parents are having a hard time maintaining sobriety. At the moment, we're not doing very well in that area. And that project he has out in East County would be a perfect spot to anchor a rural early intervention implementation of wraparound."

Hi O' Silver, Away

"So you leave and I'm stuck having to make nice with the guy who tried to destroy your project and your reputation?"

"Can you think of any sweeter revenge than turning him into the beast he most deeply despises – a wraparound true believer?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact I can."

"If he was a total loss I'd stay and smash him myself, but that's not the case."

As they were getting their coats and heading out to their cars, Carol asked Apollina, "So, are you going to leave me a silver bullet before you ride off into the sunset?"

"No faithful companion, I'm going to need all of my bullets for myself. You're going to have to make some of your own."

"You mean someday I too can become a masked avenger?"

Apollina laughed, gave her friend a hug and said, "Carol, you already are. It's just taking you a while to figure it out."

And with that Apollina climbed into her white Toyota and headed off over the hills to bring wraparound to Lake County and beyond.