

Emergent Change Strategy at the BBC: Living AI During Client Contracting

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This article explores how AI values and principles were used during the contracting phase to demonstrate the power of the approach as part of the ownership management strategy, particularly by encouraging the client to participate fully in co-constructing the process of change. Key choice points, challenges, opportunities and outcomes are described related to letting a change strategy emerge rather than planning it in advance.

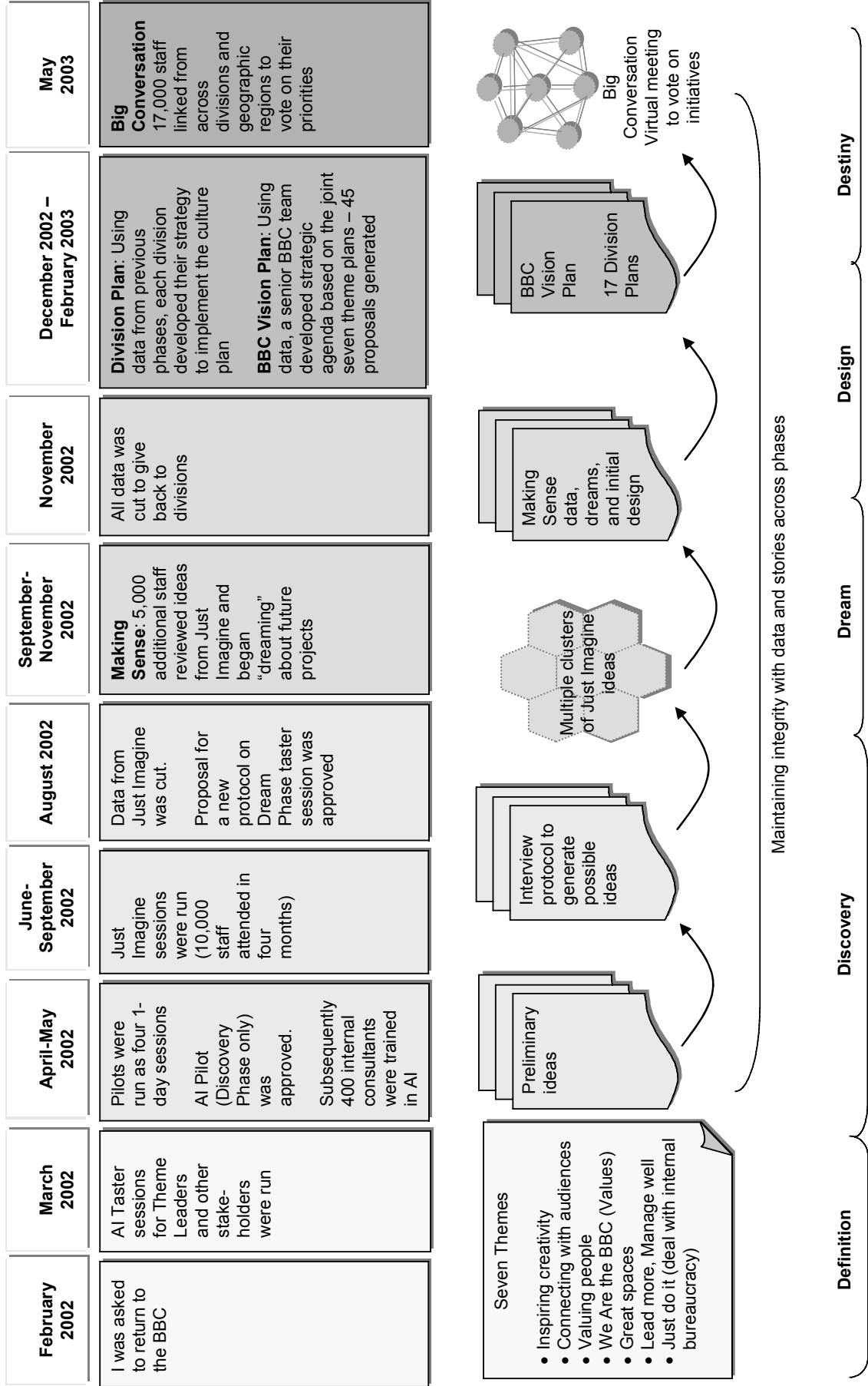
During a phone call in early February 2002, the BBC internal OD manager asked me whether I was willing to come back to the BBC to help them think through how to manage a culture change programme that was Phase II of a major transformation change programme. Up until then, I had worked in and around different bits of the BBC for about six years and had grown to love the organisation. I also knew it as one of the most stubborn systems to shift. I knew if I went back to help, only two strategies would work: a) using Appreciative Inquiry as the main approach to tap into the fantastic strengths of the organisation, mobilising its own energy to change the undesirable bits of the BBC, and b) using internal people to lead up front in order to embed any new cultural changes.

I knew I would have no problem selling the second condition since there was a strongly antagonistic feeling toward external consultants. However, this would not be so for the first. AI methodology would be so counter culture to the journalistic, deficiency-based cynicism that the key decision makers would require a lot more convincing before they would give the green light to AI. This article is my reflection on what I learned from experimenting with a new approach to the contracting and planning of change in a big system. The details of this change programme are summarised in Figure 1. on page 28.

A few key facts about the change process

- The change process engaged people mostly in England, though also around the world. At one point or another, a total of 17,000 people were involved.
- There was no formal contracting within the entire 15-month period.
- Initially, the client was very clear that they had no intention to go beyond the Discovery Phase of the AI cycle, but eventually all of the phases within the 5 D-cycle were covered, albeit in unusual ways.
- Over 400 internal change leaders led the various phases of the AI process. Their training took a minimal form due to the constraints of their work pattern.
- The Discovery Phase was called “Just Imagine.” 10,000 people attended those sessions (which were all led by BBC leaders) within a four-month period.
- Another 5,000 attended the Dream Phase, “Making Sense,” over some two months.

Figure 1: Timeline of the rollout for OneBBC: Making it Happen



- The Design Phase was done by 17 divisional teams and seven corporate theme teams working with more than 97,800 individual comments. These were categorised into 25,000 ideas which informed the formulation of 45 proposals! These proposals captured how the BBC staff felt they would like to change the culture.

- The voices of 17,000 were brought into the ending of the Design Phase to vote for their top priorities for changing BBC culture — the purpose was to gain ownership before the Destiny Phase.

- Six new implementation teams were set up at the Destiny Phase to implement the culture change programme.

- Appreciative Inquiry as a term was not used in any of the internal communications, except with the HR leaders and the internal change team.

How did I “contract” for emergence in strategy? And what were the key choice points in defining this highly emergent change strategy continuously?

In a traditional OD process, contracting is a crucial means of achieving clarity between client and helper about what needs to take place, determining what processes or methodologies will be used, the scope of the project, and agreeing on deliverables, project costs, and other resource implications. Instinctively, I knew I had to try other ways.

First, I struck an agreement that I would be happy to help without a formal contract at this stage because I wanted them to be sure they liked the approach. Invoicing on a daily rate with a rough estimate of the first phase was agreed.

Second, I suggested that since the proposed approach was so counter culture, the best procedure was for us to test it with all the key stakeholders such as theme leaders, theme team members and divisional leaders who would eventually help to lead the change.

There were two motives behind my suggestions: a) to create at the “testing stage” a process that would help them experience the 5-D cycle and b) to talk about how the Destiny stage should roll out. Those who experienced the approach were asked to help design and reshape the methodology to fit the BBC culture; and to facilitate the connection of diverse parts of the system so that the new network would be created. Through these interrelationships, a new way of thinking about change (AI) could be circulated more rapidly and new meaning about what is acceptable and what is not would be established.

Practically, what did I do?

- Found my natural allies (HR/OD population) and through short educational sessions on AI, mobilised them as the first group of catalysts.

- Introduced AI to the full time change manager and theme leaders, anticipating their strong objections to the methodology. When they did, I actively encouraged them to work on identifying alternative methodologies. While this was a risky step, I knew if a feasible alternative was identified then my job would be to help them to make that work. But I also had tremendous trust in the AI process. I knew there was a high probability they would come back to some democratic large group type of methodology that I could easily weave AI back into.

- Set up a number of “AI Taster” sessions, and actively planned to bring various key

opinion formers together to experience the process. The design of the AI Taster sessions had five major parts: 1) A connection exercise; 2) Paired AI interview on best experiences in the BBC; 3) Debrief of the interview and extraction of the themes; 4) Making it Happen conversations – turning their themes and wishes to reality personally and collectively; 5) Debrief of the first four activities where participants were asked to give their feedback and help to modify the methodology so that they felt they themselves could own and run the programme.

- Suggested that we run more pilot sessions even after the Taster session so that at every stage the client felt they were in control, and that there were many safety nets set up to ensure they did not have to worry about the risk factors. At every stage, our motto was: “Let’s try this, see how it turns out, and we will decide later.”

During the above, the power of many of the AI principles were demonstrated, such as, giving people the voice; inviting them to participate in the design of something they have passion for and hence own; helping them to share what matters to them (to see the BBC strong); connecting them with each other; helping to build a new type of network community to stop the various groups from staying rigid; and encouraging all those who have public roles in leading the change to dialogue with each other in order to balance fear and scepticism with dreams and hope.

By having the AI experience, their readiness to take on the methodologies willingly increased as well as their capability. There was also further capability training in areas such as group dynamics and facilitation skills.

Throughout this period, I used my personal credibility among the major stakeholders who knew and trusted me as a guarantee to soothe them, and used the commercial logic that “this is lower cost” to entice them. After the taster session, the key players gave the go ahead – but for the Discovery Phase only! As I promised, I supported this choice despite the fact that I had no idea whether the rest of the AI cycle (Dream, Design, and Destiny) would be completed or not.

The key choice points for me during this period were:

- Respecting the system’s own defences and working with their level of readiness.
- Having faith in the AI processes. I stayed confident that once they experienced AI, it would become their natural choice of intervention.
- Believing that by extending an invitation to participate, and creating necessary safety nets to ease the anxiety, people are more relaxed in their decision-making.
- Believing that the process we used would have to be congruent with the AI methodology. In other words, our processes and style would have to symbolise the end game of what we were trying to introduce.
- Accepting that continuous re-definition is a reality in a large-scale change and developing a calm persona to harness the frustration level.
- Holding on to the polarity of planned change and emerged change, knowing that it is important to manage the up side of both: the process at every point was negotiated and changed frequently AND backstage, I worked hard to set up the necessary wiring and framework to hold the emerging data and dynamics together.

What was the result of managing the contracting phase this way?

- The BBC agreed to the Discovery phase of AI.
- A one-D protocol (Discovery) was designed – called Just Imagine
- The BBC put forward 400 internal change agents to be trained in AI and this Just Imagine protocol.
 - The 400 change agents ran Just Imagine sessions in the nation and the rest of the world and over 10,000 people attended within a four-month period. These sessions varied in length: some ran for a whole day with big numbers (500), some for half a day in small groups.
 - The BBC decision makers gave the go ahead to run the third D process – “Dream” – called “Making Sense.”

What were the challenges and opportunities at each choice point?

Challenges:

- My constant worry was that I had allowed so much fragmentation of the AI approach and methodology that it would lose its integrity. I worried that by going what felt like 100% their way, I had minimised the impact and the potency of the methodology.
- The challenge of living with ambiguity, never 100% sure whether the pilot taster sessions would deliver their guarantee. Learning to live with multiple paradigms, personalities and preferences proved a significant personal challenge for me.
- The challenge of having to live what I preached – the importance of co-construction. The messiness of co-construction can be overwhelming, not to mention my inability to put my own professional stamp on this process.

Opportunities:

- The ability to increase the ownership from the key stakeholders. By encouraging others to put their stamp on the process through joint working, participation and joint problem solving, the end result was a methodology owned by those implementing it.
- The ability of the system to sort itself out. Once the key players constructed something they owned, they ran these sessions with a level of enthusiasm hard to match. They also fine-tuned the programme and willingly asked for further support.
- Practicing the key principles of a living system – connecting people – stirring their passion to make something work in their division created a level of energy I had never witnessed before.
- The opportunity to really work in a partnership approach, tapping into the diverse wisdom and intelligence of the system was a sheer joy.

What were the key relationships in defining this highly emergent change strategy continuously and how did they evolve?

To manage such an emerging approach, I knew that my relationship with the key internal client - in this case, the full time change manager of the BBC - would be critical. By the time I joined the change project, the full time change manager (a very well known and highly regarded senior television producer) had been chosen by the Executive Board to head up the initiative. They knew the respect she commanded from the production staff would be a great help to the change programme, not to mention her incredibly empathetic and creativity

ability. From the moment we met, I knew that with her extraordinary ability to read people and situations, she would be able to give us accurate data (behavioural and emotional) about how the production staff (those involved in the core service of the BBC) felt about the change. Thus, when she hesitated, I knew I must listen and explore the underlying thinking. This required us spending time together regularly, mapping the change, reviewing what happened previously, discussing how each of the key stakeholders were feeling about the change, and her strategies in managing her team as well as those to whom she had to report. This heavy investment of both of our time definitely helped to seal the partnership approach and ensured sufficient mutual trust built up to maintain a clear communication line.

Practically, what did I do?

We structured one-to-one sessions lasting two or three hours approximately every three weeks. During these meetings, we conducted a personal check-in and went through both her and my agendas to ensure we covered all the issues that required our attention. I also used these sessions to do relevant bits of capability building to ensure she not only learned more and more about AI, change management, and use of self as an instrument, but also that she had space to reflect on what excited her and worried her. Often, the critical redefining of what we should do happened in these meetings, sometimes with heated debate, taking different sides, arguing through the pros and cons and alternatives. This relationship formed one of the cornerstones for the success of the project and its outcomes.

Reflections on emergent designing and redefining the change strategy

As I look back, this change process has been most amazing. I have never before witnessed the sheer power of a truly democratic positive change strategy so fully planned and customised by the client system. The level of energy and imagination mobilised by their passion was awesome to see. The system once known to be most resistant to change transformed itself through the power of the Appreciative Inquiry approach. So, in ending I will summarise my learning by using Margaret Wheatley's four key change principles from her book *Leadership and the New Science*.

- Participation is not a choice. Here the client genuinely took full charge of designing what they wanted in a situation when I perceived their lack of real understanding of the key methodology we proposed to use.
- Life always reacts to directives, it never obeys them. I learnt that I need to offer my view as an invitation for co-construction. This helped change both the expectations people had of me and I of them. Learning how to honour relationships, I experienced that relationships, in turn, honour the change process.
- Reality and meaning are individually owned. I learnt that the internal staff and myself carried different meanings and interpretations of what was going on in the organisation and how a methodology may play with different groups of staff. Holding my meaning while inviting others to share theirs prevented arguments over who might be right or wrong. By actively seeking out the diversity of interpretation, I and others learnt about and managed this change process more creatively.
- To create better health in a living system, connect it to more of itself. Through this

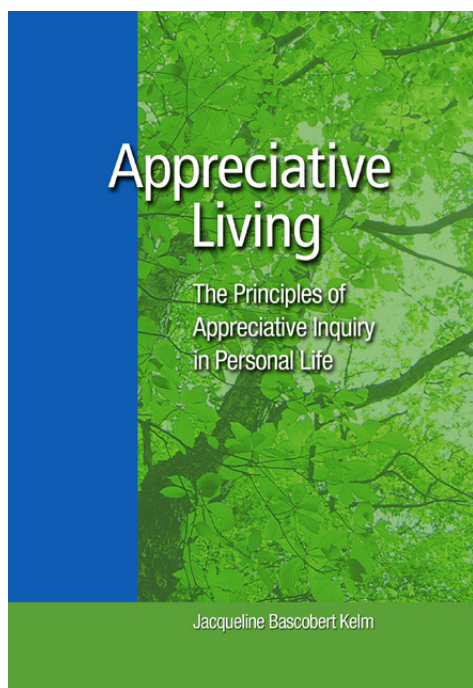
change I learned that the critical task of a change leader is not to tell the system what to do and how to do it, but to provide new and richer information so that the system can react and develop a willingness to be disturbed. Once that has happened, it will connect to its own resources and capability for changing itself. By continuously helping people to connect with each other – structuring opportunities for them to talk and shape their own destiny, I have witnessed the best of group dynamics. At the end, when 17,000 staff were reached and invited to signal what they wanted, I knew the system had shaped its own destiny.

What so amazed me is that by managing this contract with this approach, the intense scepticism in the BBC culture seemed to self-correct. At the end of the Discovery phase, via its own will to keep the momentum of change, the system wanted to move through the other Ds in order to continue the upwardly spiralling journey to make BBC the most creative media organisation. The impact of the AI approach was once again verified.

Footnote

1 A fuller article describing the change process is in *The Handbook of Large Group Methods* edited by Barbara Benedict Bunker and Billie Alban, Jossey-Bass 2006.

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