The Reflective Power of Images

By Marcia Hyatt, Ginny Belden-Charles and Debbie Ackley

"Isn't this just another training game? One of those cute things that is supposed to get us energized and talking to one another?" This may be the response if the facilitator asks the group to draw an image -- an image of their team, an image of themselves, an image of the organization. Yet creating images is one of the most powerful processes for surfacing paradigms. Generally, I cannot tell you my paradigms, because to me they are reality, the way things are. Yet underneath the surface of my actions, I have an image of myself, of you, or of our team that roots my behavior. If I see you as a mother figure or like my 3rd grade teacher, it will influence how I experience you and how I behave with you.

Robert Ornstein, in his book <u>The Evolution of Consciousness</u>, explains our brain only receives about one-trillionth of the information that reaches it. To cope with the information we do absorb, we seek patterns to make meaning of the data. Our internally held image or pattern acts as a magnet, drawing perceived data into this frame of seeing the world. William Yabroff, in his book <u>The Inner Image</u>, explains: the image captures the experience, we use words to report it out. Jung considered the active use of imagery to "be among the highest forms of psychic activity" where the conscious and unconscious flow together.

Kenneth Boulding, in his book <u>The Image,</u> (1956) contends that knowledge is really image since there is no definite reality.

> "We know that what used to be regarded as primary sense data are in fact highly learned interpretations. We see the way we see the world because it pays us and has paid us to see it that way." (P. 50)

We have an image of who we are and where we are in relationship to others. Behavior depends on the image - the sum of what we think we know and what makes us act the way we do. The images we hold are not available by a conscious scanning process or surfaced by an act of will. They must be surfaced through drawing, playing, watching language, and/or deep reflection.

Asaf Zohar shared a case study of an organization attempting to use self-organization principles. (The 3rd Annual Chaos Network Conference: From Chaos to Complexity New Tools for a Complex World) The experiment started off well, members of the system agreeing to their self-organizing operating principles. It started to go downhill after that. Zohar observed the head of the central office imaged herself as a parent and the rest of the organization as children. For example, she would refer to the decentralized sites as "children". In another episode:

"...she tearfully shared her feelings of pain and confusion at the prospect of untying the apron strings and releasing her 'children' (page 64)

This unconscious image perpetuated hierarchical behavior and not the self organizing behavior that had been consciously agreed upon. The image, unsurfaced, controlled the behavior, not the espoused agreements.

The image held frames the identity and the options within that. Mulfinger, Susanka, Mahady and Partners is a successful architectural firm specializing in residential construction in the Minneapolis and St. Paul areas of Minnesota. The firm has achieved success in the marketplace and the loyalty of its associates by re-imaging themselves. As the firm was growing, the original partners sought a new image for themselves. Instead of using the traditional model for an architectural firm, they used the image of a law office to create their organization. They observed there was a misfit between the self reliance and independence fostered in the schools of architecture and the low pay and subservience model used within the majority of architectural firms. By exploring and re-imaging themselves as a law office, they found a model that focused on developing self-sufficient professionals. With this model, the mode of operating and structural systems do not resemble a traditional architectural firm.

Another example is a workshop held for middle management. During the workshop, we ask the middles to draw the current image of leadership in their company. In workshop after workshop, different groups of middles drew a picture of the tops controlling things and the bottoms at the receiving end. The middles did not draw themselves as leaders of the company. This matched much of their powerless behavior. The middles imaged themselves as invisible and acted accordingly. Their language further illustrated this image: "I am caught between the dog and the fire hydrant" or, "I am a prize fighter who is mostly using defensive maneuvers just for the privilege of staying in the fight".

You cannot impose or prescribe new images. Images are resistant to change. When we first receive messages that conflict with the image that is held, we reject the messages as untrue. Yet unless the current image is plowed under we cannot create and live out of a new image; we cannot transform. The images held need to be surfaced, only then are other ways of seeing and significant change possible.

Creating and reflecting on images is essential for transformational change. This level of consciousness expands our ability to see new possibilities. This is not a quick process, and not done through the creation of one drawing or metaphor, but it is the beginning of the process of seeing what we don't see.

Marcia Hyatt and Ginny Belden-Charles specialize in helping leaders and groups uncover limiting assumptions and discover new possibilities for growth and strategic change. To reach Ginny, go to www.beldencharles.com.