



BRENDA ZIMMERMAN AND BRYAN HAYDAY SHARE
A POWERFUL TOOL FOR BUILDING AND MAINTAINING
GENERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN AND BETWEEN

GROUPS. DERIVED FROM THEIR RESEARCH IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS
AND FROM YEARS OF SUCCESSFUL CONSULTATION PRACTICE, THE
TOOL REFLECTS SOME OF THE MOST CHALLENGING AND
DISRUPTIVE FACETS OF GROUP DYNAMICS. AS A MIRROR, THE
TOOL ALLOWS GROUPS TO ARTICULATE AND RESPOND TO UNSEEN
DYNAMICS THAT BLOCK THEIR ABILITY TO WORK TOGETHER
TOWARD COMMON ENDS. THE EXAMPLES ZIMMERMAN AND
HAYDAY SHARE HELP DEMONSTRATE WHEN AND HOW THE TOOL
WILL SUPPORT MANY KINDS OF GROUP DYNAMICS.

GENERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS S T A R

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Complex Contexts Call for Relationships which Can Generate Novel Solutions

A generative relationship “produces new sources of value which cannot be foreseen in advance.” (Lane and Maxfield, 1996, pg. 215).

There are two key components to this definition. The first is that the relationship produces something, which one of the members of the relationship could not have produced alone. Second, the source of value (whether it be a new product, service, form of distribution, or idea) could not have been foreseen in advance. It was created by the interaction between the parties.

Joint ventures may or may not be generative relationships. Often, they are merely partners who know what needs to be done *a priori* but each have a gap or deficiency which can be addressed by the other joint venture partner(s). Although this satisfies the first criterion of generative relationships, the source of value was foreseen in advance.

In complex contexts, where the future is inherently unknowable because the industry, sector, or society is going through transformational change, generative relationships are important. They allow the parties to learn as they co-create a new product, service, distribution process, or solution.

Generative relationships have the capacity to deal with complex contexts where change is happening both at the level of structure (e.g., who the players in the industry are) and at a conceptual level (e.g., the definitions of the product or service). The story of ROLM and the PBX (internal telephone systems) is an example of how quickly a whole industry can shift when a product is reconceived as a voice-interface management tool rather than a “telephone.” Suddenly, computer manufacturers were key competitors with telephone giants like AT&T. ROLM fostered generative relationships to thrive in this environment, which they co-created.

How do you know whether a relationship will be generative or not? How do you enhance the generative potential of existing relationships? In an action research project with a non-profit social service agency, which struggled with this concept, we used a four pointed star to demonstrate the dimensions of a generative relationship. We used the acronym of STAR to make the idea memorable. Before looking at organizational examples of the STAR’s use, we will define and describe the acronym with suggestions for practical applications.

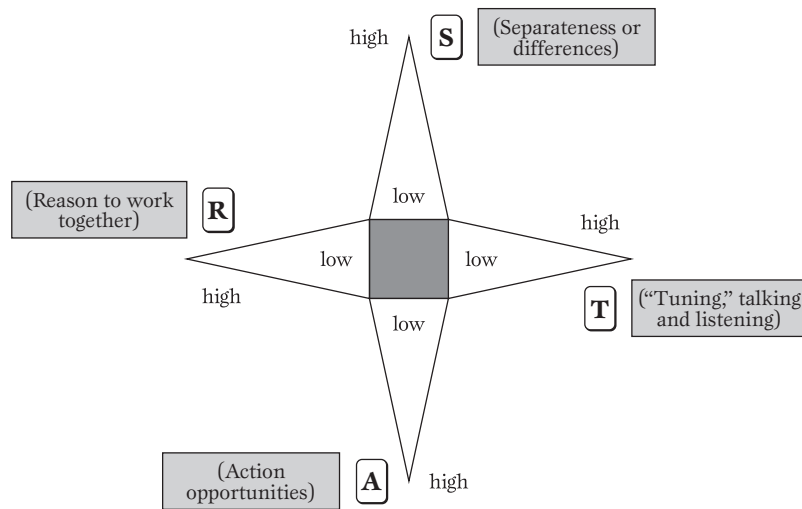
Relationships with more generative potential are seen to have longer points on the generative relationship STAR. Each point of the STAR represents one key aspect of generative relationships and is a continuum from very low to very high levels of this aspect or attribute of a generative relationship.

Each point of the STAR represents one key aspect of generative relationships.

- Separateness or differences. There need to be differences in the background, skills, perspectives, or training of the parties. If all of the parties are similar,

they may enjoy heated debates but may leave untouched or unchallenged the assumptions upon which both sides of the argument are based. One cannot challenge an assumption which goes unnoticed. Differences allow the partners or group to see things from a different perspective. They allow “facts” to be seen as “interpretations.”

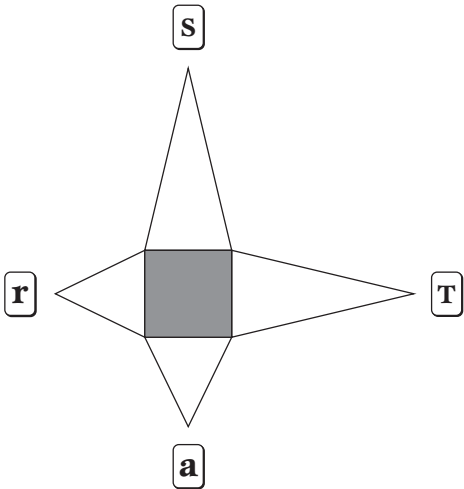
- Talking and listening (“tuning”). There needs to be real opportunities to talk and listen to each other with permission to challenge the status quo, sacred cows, or implicit assumptions of the context. The conceptual changes in a complex context can be profound. Opportunities for reflection allow the parties to grow and learn.
- Action opportunities. Talk is great but unless it is accompanied by acting on the talk, new sources of value will not be created. The parties need to be able to act together to co-create something new.
- Reason to work together. The parties need to have a reason to share resources and ideas, or to act as allies even if only for a short period. There has to be some mutual benefit to being aligned in a project. If the parties do not see value in working together, if they see each other as adversaries only rather than as allies for this piece of work, it is highly unlikely that they will co-create something of substantial value. They may talk and learn from each other, but then do the work of creating something new alone.



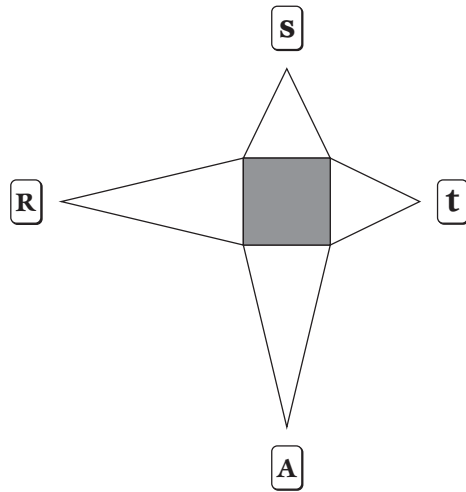
S (separateness) and T (tuning) are necessary to enhance the capacity to generate unforeseen insights and sources of value. S and T operate primarily at the conceptual level. It is through redefining a “fact” or challenging an implicit assumption that new ideas can be created. A (action opportunities) and R (reason to work together) operate primarily at the structural level. It is through action that new players, products and services actually emerge.

In our work, we found that some of the relationships that were labeled as “generative” by the non-profit social service agency failed to produce anything of value because they were lopsided stars — only a couple of points were well-represented in the relationship.

For example, an ST relationship was one where representatives from the whole community came together to solve a social problem. However, the parties had no reason to work together. They saw themselves as competitors for a shrinking pool of funds and the trust was not there to see each other as allies. Therefore, there were no real action opportunities defined by the parties.



An AR relationship was one where two parties were collaborating to address a problem but the parties were almost “clones.” The employees had the same background and perspective. Although they had made time for “T,” talking and listening, because they had so few differences, there was little challenge of the status quo.



STARs can be fostered within organizations and between organizations. Especially in large organizations, the potential for internal STARs may be high as specialization between departments has increased the capacity for S (separateness or differences). In addition, downsizing may have reduced the time for T (talking and listening to challenge ideas.) Cross-functional task forces address S (separateness or differences) and, if they are well managed, also address T. They also make A (action) a requirement which often makes R (reason to work together) obvious.

Relationships with lots of generative potential have four long points. In complex contexts, these need to be fostered and nurtured. However, there is a down-side. These long STARs require a heavy commitment of time. They can be much more exhausting than relationships with more similarities and less need to explore implicit assumptions. As time is a limited resource, it is important to recognize which relationships need the most generative potential and hence which STARs are

more worthwhile. In addition, there is a need to develop and distribute STARs throughout the organization. Trying to centrally control all STARs limits the capacity of the whole organization.

In working with the STAR concept, we often ask groups to identify complex issues for which they need more generative potential in the relationships. Usually we ask them to work through exercises such as the following.

1. Think about your current relationships at work—both inside the organization and outside the organization. What shape of STAR do you see in these relationships? Where do you need to further develop long STARs to address the complex contexts in your work?
2. Mapping current relationship STARs: Identify the key relationships that are engaged in this complex issue. Plot each on the STAR. (The relationships can be with individuals or institutions, and they can be either internal or external to the organization.)

Then we ask, for each relationship, what needs to be done to enhance its generative potential?

To get them started, we often offer a few examples. The lower case letters in the word “STAR” represent the gaps or weaknesses in the relationship.

- A **STaR**, is a relationship with limited action opportunities. What is blocking the action opportunities? Is it a bureaucratic approval process or the need for a supervisor’s permission to act?
- A **sTAR** is missing separateness or differences. To enhance its capacity to generate new insights, products,

or services, new perspectives need to be brought into the relationship. This may require new participants or at least some structured creativity exercises to reveal hidden assumptions. Who could be added or dropped to enhance the differences in the group?

- A **STar** is all talk and no action. What is preventing the relationship from moving to action? Can you change this context?
 - A **stAR** has limited capacity for reflecting on the conceptual changes that are happening. So it may fail to recognize shifts in patterns and thus will expend resources on experiments without capitalizing on the learning from them.
3. Mapping potential relationship STARs — Do the same as the previous exercise but instead of identifying and mapping current relationships, identify potential relationships.

Examples from organizations

(Each of these organizations is a Canadian voluntary sector [not-for-profit] organization. We have disguised the names to provide anonymity.)

National Youth Shelter

National Youth Shelter is one of Canada's largest youth shelters in the country. They provide care and sanctuary and, in addition, focus on advocacy and education for homeless youth. The Toronto chapter wanted to expand their impact by alleviating poverty on a broader scale than their efforts to date. They were aware that the challenge they posed for themselves was complex and needed generative relationships. The STAR

was used as a preliminary diagnosis of existing relationships inside and outside the organization. In each case, they found long R but frequently short, or very short, A, T and S attributes.

By examining the S of their board, they were able to articulate the fact that major sectors of society they needed to accomplish their mission were not represented. They also saw how similar the education and vocational backgrounds were of the employees. They made a decision to search out board members, volunteers, and employees with different backgrounds. They realized this would take some time, so in the interim, they sought out the opinions of the missing factions to bring to the staff and board meetings.

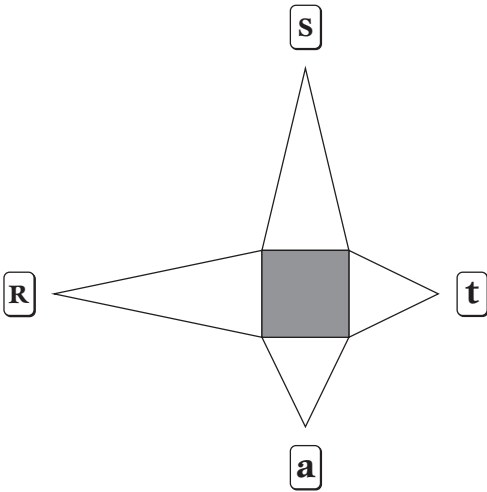
They also became aware of how the top-down management style and functionally-based organization limited the T and hence the cross-fertilization of ideas. In addition, they became more aware of how little the Toronto chapter interacted with sister chapters or other homeless advocacy organizations. This was noted as short T and a short A as they felt they were missing opportunities for acting on their mission. Again, specific recommendations were made and followed to engage with others and to collaborate on influencing policy makers and the media to support their cause.

Canadian Cancer Care Foundation

The Canadian Cancer Care Foundation (CCCCF) is a registered charitable organization dedicated exclusively to raising funds and to support the advancement of cancer research, education, diagnosis, and treatment. It exists in a highly uncertain environment with increased competition, increased demands for transparency and accountability, changing fund raising practices and donors' attitudes, and policy uncertainty for health charities.

The CCCF used the STAR to examine their relationships with corporations. They felt these relationships needed to have generative potential to help navigate the white waters they were facing in their environment. They decided that these relationships mostly looked like StaRs. Although the differences (S) were great, and the reasons to work together clear (R), they continually let opportunities pass them by (a). The more they discussed this, the more they determined the short “t” was the primary area they needed to work on. They saw the small “a” as somewhat artificial in that they were many opportunities to act but the lack of tuning in to their differences meant they rarely were able to seize the opportunities in time. They were being “scooped” by the competition on a regular basis.

Others argued that the short “t” was a systemic problem and had lead to an organization where staff worked in opposite directions, or at least in isolation, and by so doing had lost the internal cohesion that had once been a hallmark of the organization.



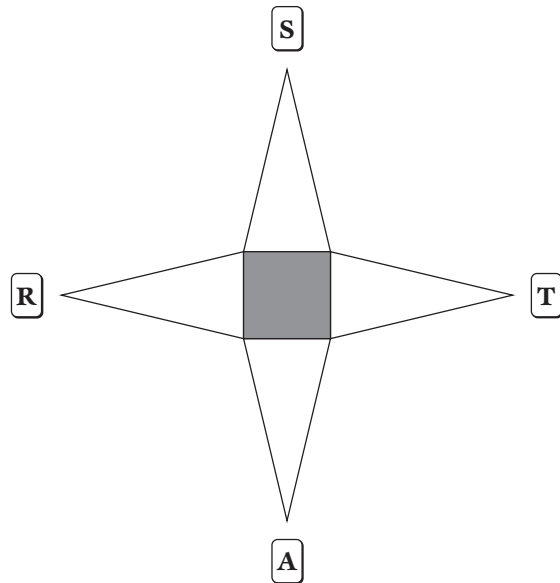
Family Support Agency

The Family Support Agency is an old established organization in Canada that focuses on strengthening families and communities through counseling and community development programs. They used the STAR to evaluate the relationships with their staff, the senior management team, the Board, and with two of their major funders. When they examined the latter, they wanted to learn what they could do to increase the generative potential of their relationships with funders. They invested heavily in both relationships but they did not feel they were achieving sufficient return or value to their mission given the efforts required. Both of the STARS looked quite similar with long S but all other dimensions were short (or weak). They discussed what it would take to change the “t,” “a,” and “r” for each relationship. They were quickly discouraged when they examined the first relationship. The power differential was so great and the politics with the funder were so extreme, that they felt it was almost impossible to change the “r” or to work directly on “a.” But when they examined the second funding relationship, the energy in the room changed dramatically. They quickly generated a series of options of things they could do to impact “t,” “a,” and “r.”

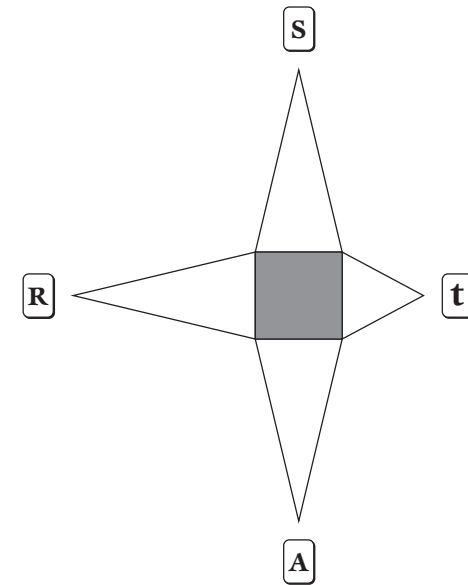
The question they then posed was where they should focus their opportunity energy. They decided that the first “stuck” relationship would continue to be stuck whether they invested in it or not. However, the second relationship held real potential. They began to list concrete steps, and later acted upon them, to increase the generative potential of their chosen relationship. For the other relationship, they met requirements but did not heavily invest in it with time or energy. In their minds, the relationships were not equal in terms of potential to impact their mission.

Social Service Organization

Social Service Organization (SSO) took pride in their board. They knew it was diverse, functioned well, and was able to handle serious challenges. One of the Board members brought the STAR concept to their attention. Just out of interest, the Board members decided to each anonymously draw their depiction of the Board's generative potential. The result was a constellation of STARS and all but two looked like the Board needed nothing more to increase its generative potential.



However, two of the STARS were significantly different in the T dimension.



This was a shock to the Board. At first, there was denial. Apparently a couple of the Board members did not understand the tool. But after a while the conversation turned. They began to individually and then collectively identify ways in which they shut down the potential to work with the diversity they had on the Board. The “shut downs” were inadvertent, but real. They decided to bring in a facilitator, versed in diversity, to help them explore ways to tune in better and to reveal the assumptions around the Board table.

Downtown Hospital

Hospitals face a continual challenge of great differences between the clinical specialties and between clinicians and managers. At the Downtown hospital, they determined their staff had an overall profile of StaR — lots of differences, good reasons to work together, but poor tuning and acting on opportunities. They saw the long S as both a threat and an

opportunity for the hospital to have a significant impact on the health of the community.

Downtown Hospital talked about being patient centered. This was a value shared by both clinical staff and management staff. When some of the management staff were exposed to the STAR concept, they decided that with busy, and often impatient, clinicians, working on the poor “t” directly would not be feasible. Instead, they determined that they would be won over by actions. They began to identify actions where emergent, generative potential was demonstrated and they then talked about how the successes were generated. They looked for initiatives they could support across the disciplines and the other hospital divides. These were often small action opportunities but they created energy — a buzz. When the buzz spread, they then had the attention of individual or small groups of clinicians and staff members. They were then able to work on the “t” dimension more directly. They could emphasize the strength of the differences when they were used to find new ways of acting. They used actions to create momentum and then back into the tuning dimension.

Conclusions

The concept of generative relationships is appealing. The idea of creating something that is more than the sum of the parts is indeed a draw for most people struggling with complex human system issues. However, the concept is too vague or too conceptual for most people to use to good effect in achieving their missions. We have found that the STAR diagram is a useful way to focus people’s attention on the different dimensions that contribute to a generative relationship. The STAR is not perfect. It does, however, allow for new questions and insights to emerge. The examples above used the STAR to:

1. Differentiate the amount of energy to invest into relationships
2. Examine whether relationships are judged the same by all involved
3. Discern where efforts need to be made to have greatest impact on the relationship’s generative potential.

We believe the greatest value of the STAR is its capacity to reframe the focus of conversations about relationships.

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Dr. Brenda Zimmerman is a professor of Strategic Management at the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto. During 2000 – 2002, she joined McGill’s Faculty of Management as an Associate Professor and had a joint appointment with the Faculty of Medicine. Between 1998 – 2003, she was a professor in the McGill-McConnell Masters’ Program for Voluntary Sector Leaders.

Her primary research applies complexity science to management and leadership issues in organizations, especially voluntary sector or not-for-profit organizations, experiencing high levels of uncertainty and turbulence. Since 1996 the bulk of her research and teaching has focused on health care with an emphasis on clinicians in management and leadership roles. She has been an invited speaker at many health care conferences in the USA sponsored by the American Hospital Association, VHA (Voluntary Hospital Association), and the

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Bryan Hayday's career spans roles as a CEO, Executive Director, lecturer, and consultant with government and non-governmental agencies and organizations in the health, education, and social service sectors across Canada. Frequent assignments in scenario planning, organizational change, strategic management, leadership development, and governance issues characterize Bryan's consulting practice. Through this work, he increasingly uses the frameworks of complex adaptive systems as the basis for practical recommendations that derive from robust strategies. In addition to his consulting practice, Bryan is part of the Non-Profit Management and Leadership Program at the Schulich School of Business at York University, teaching courses on organizational development, leadership, and complexity.

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