V/A INTERVIEW

Interview with Mary Gelinas and Roger James

by
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Mary Gelinas

Roger James

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Roger G. James, Ed.D, is a Managing Director of Gelinas James Akiyoshi. Roger has 20 years experience as a consultant, during which he has focused on the development of high performance/high commitment organizations through large-scale, collaborative redesign processes. He has consulted in a wide variety of industries, including manufacturing, consumer goods, healthcare, utilities, and petroleum.

V/A: Can you talk about how you both got into OD.

MG: I was in graduate school at the University of Massachusetts majoring in journalism in the early 70s when I visited some of the first national drug education centers. I saw groups of students, teachers, parents, board members, and community members having conversations about how to improve situations in schools and in the community so that kids would not abuse drugs. I was so moved by the notion that people could sit in a room and talk about what they wanted to create together and build agreements about that that I changed my direction from journalism. I did not even know Organization Development existed at that point. The idea that people could sit together and create something together was mind boggling to me. It moves me to this day. So I started taking courses in business, psychology, education and created a program for myself about how to do that kind of work.

RJ: I meandered my way through archeology, then became a bilingual teacher, then worked in family therapy. I started with individuals and said, that is not working, then went on to families and said, that works but I am too young. At that time I was in a Masters program at UMass and had to develop an undergraduate program in human services, and got invited into the Doctoral program in OD. I ended up working with Don Carew, Fred Finch and others in an interdisciplinary program spanning business, psychology, and education. What attracted me to these people was the weaving together of a series of disciplines, based on an explicit values set focused on groups, organizations, and systems. This seemed like a place I could operate in ways that were tremendously growthful for me and where I thought I could make a contribution at some point.

V/A: Give us a flavor of your experiences in OD.

MG: I got offered a job in California to work for one of the national drug education training centers. I left there to work for Kaiser-Permanente as an internal consultant. Then I was offered a job as a manager in a small R&D company in the Bay Area. This allowed be to pursue my interest in OD as a line management function. Then I was asked to join Interaction Associates, Inc., where I stayed for a number of years. I learned so much there about large-scale collaborative change. I had the opportunity to consult to a number of comprehensive change initiatives in health care, manufacturing, utilities, and government. However, my sights were always on learning from other people, meeting other consultants who knew something I did not know, following them around, learning from them. I began a journey which took me out of that consulting firm to set up my own practice. I began to recognize then that there was a whole universe of things I did not know.

RJ: My first consulting project was in 1976 with the New York State

Division for Youth, which was trying to develop interdisciplinary self-managed teams for managing cases. Then I worked with the Office of Personnel Management for the Federal government. I left the Feds in 1981 and came to work for PG&E where I stayed for eight years, eventually becoming Director of OD. The opportunity to work at PG&E was a godsend. They had not had an internal consulting capability until then. They invited Jim Koch, who was a very strong socio-tech person, to lead the effort. We had many great people there with no restrictions on where the internal group practiced. We did redesign of power plants, worked with the CEO, designed and conducted senior leadership retreats, and got to partner with McKinsey on restructuring the entire company. PG&E's OD group offered me a chance to experience a high level of collegiality working with people who are lifetime friends and great teachers for me. We had the time and energy to sit back and learn from our work. For example, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how we could get information on the actual impact of projects we evaluated. . . data we had confidence in that would allow us to say with some confidence that this actually worked, this is what we got from it.

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V/A: At some point in time the two of your start to work together. Why?

RJ: Mary and I decided we were differentiated enough in our practice that we could work together. We see the world quite differently. We have strong biases about why we do this work and what we would like to see achieved through the application of our efforts, so that working together is a constant revelation for me. Mary is a great teacher for me, about what this work means, and about what it means to have a vocation to make some kind of positive impact in the world.

This is a time when people who have an alternative perspective on how organizations and the world can be have an obligation to step out and to say: There is a new, more human way to do things, to engage people more meaningfully in their lives at work. And to say that forcefully and to demonstrate that this alternative perspective is not necessarily at the expense of profitability and organizational gain, that these things can not only go hand in hand, they can drive each other. If it is true that this alternative perspective needs wholehearted representation in the world; if I have that perspective, I really need to extend myself fully to demonstrate its value.

MG: When I went out on my own I learned organizational design, business process reegineering and the new thinking about Organization Transformation. I studied how knowledge work occurs. I also learned about the principles and practices of indigenous peoples by working with Angeles Arrien, a cross-cultural anthropologist. All of this began a pathway to the work Roger and I do now.

An oil company for which I was working wanted to integrate its research, technology, and environmental organizations into one operating company. They also wanted to reduce the hierarchy and increase customer service. So Roger and I worked together to link restructuring the organization to substantially redesigning how it worked. Rogers specialty was organizational redesign. I brought my skills in large scale organizational change.

We wanted to use this project as an opportunity to integrate the best of what we knew from socio-technical systems redesign, transition and change management, quality improvement, and collaborative problem solving; and, at the same time we wanted to leave behind the weak spots of each of these approaches. For example, we wanted to leave out the tendency to drown in detail in socio-tech, or the gap in resolving the cross-organizational issues in quality, or rolling out change in the more traditional approaches to change management. We created Collaborative Organizational Design, which is a methodology with four basic components. First is the Elements of Organization, which is a kind of new and improved 7-S model. The second is the Principles of Collaborative Change. (These were adapted from principles originally developed by Interaction Associates, Inc.) The third component of the methodology includes three process maps: Developing the Foundation For Change, Designing

Change, and Implementing Change. These maps make explicit the process people would go through to redesign their organization. (Process maps are one way to graphically depict process. The format we use is similar to the one developed at Interaction Associates, Inc.) Finally, the methodology includes Leadership Development. This is a pathway that moves through each of the three process maps.

V/A: Your approach is to integrate all the things known about change while avoiding the weak spots of each. Say more about the strength and weakness of each and how they come together in your approach which you call Collaborative Organization Design.

RJ: Socio-tech is a fabulous discipline for starting a new organization or building a new plant. The difficulty I have with it is that it tends to get caught in the minutiae of understanding business processes to such an extent that a project you need to have done in six months can take three or four years. That was acceptable in the 70s. However, for redesign of large organizations today it is cumbersome and often takes too long. But having the social and technical system understanding and keeping a holistic point of view is brilliant. It is unfair, but re-engineering as it has been practiced in the US sometimes looks like socio-tech without the socio. And the thing that really upsets me is that some of the people who write about re-engineering do not give any credit whatsoever to the thirty or forty years of experience of the pioneers in socio-technical systems analysis. That seems unethical to me. If Mary and I have any gift it is the ability to synthesize, but if you do that you are building on the work of other people. Not to give credit where credit is due is shameful to me.

Meeting skills and collaborative problem solving are great but they do not take you very far in terms of systemic organizational change. To help people shed one skin and become something else, collaborative problem solving is a tool but not a sufficient one.

Organizational Transformation, if it is anything, and I am not sure it is, goes so far into esoteric concepts and incense, feathers, and crystals that most people cannot come to terms with it. I remember the first time Bob Tannenbaum said, Organization Transformation: think about it for a minute, is it even really possible? How arrogant can we be to think that we might transform organizations? I share his questions and concerns.

V/A: So out of both your backgrounds you began drawing together the pieces of things that you had done, to keep the best, get rid of the worst. Those pieces would be socio-tech, re-engineering, organizational redesign, small group leadership, organizational transformation. Then you began to create this model or template. Part of what you do in addition to building relationships with your colleagues and clients is this structured set of materials, a recipe book about how to go about organizational change. So that there is no magic, no mystery. You want to make the process explicit as much as possible.

MG: One of our values is to make the process as explicit and accessible as possible. The more explicit the process the more the client can own it and customize it for themselves. The more they understand it, the more they are able to lead the process themselves. Then consultants can be the 50-50 partners Peter Block talks about. This in turn enables the client to do their own work the next time without you.

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As we worked with different clients we recognized one piece that we had not documented: setting the stage for change and developing the foundation for change with organizational leaders. As we looked at the impact of our work, we saw that in some places it was great as a whole, but we also saw that the bottom of the organization began to move ahead of the leaders. And what did the leaders do? They pulled them back. So that was a painful lesson — we did good work and yet some of our work was not good in this one area. We began to do a lot of things to develop organizational leaders, to get them ready for change. So that they can take on for themselves the linch pin tasks of building agreements among themselves and preparing themselves for what they are going to face in terms of their own needs for personal development. This work became codified in the Developing the Foundation for Change process map mentioned earlier.

Creating change is rarely just about re-engineering a business process; it is that AND. It rarely just about rethinking your strategy; it is that AND. Change includes asking ourselves and our clients who are we as people and what are we trying to do in the world. Are

we adding light or adding dark, love or hatred, compassion or fear? The way the top behaves adds one or the other of those things every day.

RJ: Last week we were with a client, a university medical center back East, where we have worked for four years. They have taken a huge percentage out of their operating budget during those years, and, at the same time, client and employee satisfaction have soared. Now that they are a year into implementation we were visiting with them to capture learnings and evaluate the impact of our work with them. It was absolutely moving to be there and hear physicians say, Today you would never see a family or a patient walking around these hallways lost. If someone is lost a physician, a nurse, a service associate will walk out, take that person and escort them where they need to go. They fight to have the chance to help people find their way! We heard from them that our own loving concern for them and their enterprise was at least as important as whatever technical capability we brought to the change effort. I was overwhelmed.

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With other clients we might never hear that. Many organizations are extremely punitive, and/or focused primarily on the quarterly profits, the bottom line, and what the Wall Street analysts are saying. For them the capability, however briefly glimpsed, of a more human way of doing things is just not accessible or meaningful. We believe the bottom line is necessary but not sufficient. Anything that we bring is a mixture of let's improve the bottom line and make sure you are successful. AND, let's do it in a way that mobilizes the capability of all the people that you have hired, whether it be 50 or 50,000.

V/A: So with your clients you make explicit what the change process is like...

RJ: In as simple a way as possible, because it is an opportunity for clients to look forward and to look back and to make sense of what they are doing without having to build the road and walk on it at the same time. Inevitably, as we work, there is the tendency to rewrite the process, especially with scientists and engineers. But, for the most part, clients are tremendously relieved that they can, if they are doing business process analysis, for example, read a few pages and use the worksheets to help them figure out who to get involved, how to get them involved, and when to get them involved. They can also learn how to design and run the meetings in which they will analyze the business process with the key stakeholders.

We provide models for determining effective decision making processes or for planning collaboration with hundreds of people. This makes impossible projects doable. It also enables clients to lead the change initiative with our support, rather than having us lead the initiative.

For example, with one client we were able to involve 70-80% of its members across thousands of square miles in a nine-month process because we were clear on the process, and had the technology to bring data together very quickly, and feed it back to everyone in the organization. The change team could say: This is how our people analyze the current state of the business. Here are the design ideas from a thousand people.

We try to make the process as explicit, collaborative, and efficient as possible. Technology has allowed us to increase the level of effectiveness, speed and the degree of collaboration.

V/A: But you do more than share your methodology with clients. You publish your materials and share them with other consultants. You have created this framework and now written about it in three new books, Developing the Foundation for Change, Designing Change, Implementing Change (International Society for Performance Improvement). Since a lot of consultants are very proprietary about their work, why are you different?

MG: I love to write. These three books are a generic application of our Collaborative Organizational Design methodology. They are what we give to clients — leaders guides for the executives, workbooks for the design teams, and guides for the consultants. These books are about the" how." However, the "why" is equally important. Both Roger and I want people to know about our work. We are trying to make a difference in the world. Organizations have a powerful impact on the environment and the quality of peoples lives. We share a belief that if people are involved in helping redesign their organization, it will better fit who they are and the aspirations they have for them-

selves and for their children. We are not naive. Business has to survive. The reality is that organizations create jobs. If they survive and survive well, their employees can have good lives. In terms of our profession, we think it important for consultants to do this work well. The more explicit we make the process, the better able clients are to evaluate consultants' work and the better able consultants are do the work. So, at some moments we say: We want to increase the competence and capacity of our profession. This is part of why we write. It is all those things.

V/A: One of the things you learned from the your early oil company experience was that the bottom moved but the top did not move as much. While you had prepared the bottom to change, you had not prepared the top for the change that was coming, so the top pulled backward. Out of that came these books. How is that reflected in your current thinking?

RJ: What we learned there and what we are constantly relearning is the importance of what we now call Developing the Foundation, making sure that all of the understanding, knowledge and capability is in place in a leadership team before the change effort actually starts. Often, project teams rapidly outstrip the leadership team's capability to understand the organization and they propose actions that are appropriate, but frightening, to the leaders.

I recently had an experience with an extremely hierarchical, old style, manufacturing client. In that environment the leadership team really believes, although they may not say it out loud, that they know what to do and how to do it and the people working for them don't: the bottom needs powerful direction from those at the top who know. In these environments doing something like Collaborative Organization Design really challenges leaders. They could not have imagined or ever admitted that the design team would outstrip them very rapidly in terms of their understanding of the whole business and what the change levers are. In that situation, we needed to help the leaders understand what was going to happen so they could be in a position where they could be up to speed and provide whatever was required in terms of conditions, resources, guidance for the design team to do their work. That is developing the foundation.

We ask: What are the conditions required for success? What are the decisions that have to be made ahead of time and during the project? How is the leadership team going to provide the guidance that will allow this odd adventure to have the business and human impact that they want it to have? We continue to learn that doing the foundational work with leaders is not sufficient. So we continue to work with leaders to develop their capabilities as the change effort proceeds. It is extremely challenging to do those two things simultaneously. It requires a different set of skills and in many ways is a different contract with the leaders. But if we don't pursue these parallel paths, the outcomes are in jeopardy.

V/A: Be paranoid for a minute. How do you keep your model proprietary and not have it ripped off or misused by other firms? You want to make the process explicit but others out there see a way to make money. How do you get around the fact that with the publication of your materials people will steal from you, repackage it, and charge a lot more?

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RJ: Mary and I probably have different answers to that. What we have done is worse than you describe. We took the actual workbook and consultant guide and sold that on the open market. Our decision was if someone wants to steal it they can. The only reason we might protect this is if it was our only creative work and we were not going to do anything else in the future. My desire is to do my work and move on. I do not think there is any magic in what we have done. It is good work, it helps me to make sure I am not winging it as a practitioner, doing the mystical dance around the client. To the extent that our materials help others do good work with clients, great.

What we have found is that virtually all experienced practitioners who use the materials say that it is a compendium of very useful concepts and tools for doing comprehensive, integrated change projects. It reminds them, for example, that before you get started with a project you must ensure that the decision

making process is laid out explicitly, the points where the key decision makers need to be involved are defined, and the charter for a project team or a design team is clear. But some may take our stuff and take off our name. This probably occurs. Does that cut down on our practice? Probably. Could we stop it if we wanted to? Probably not. I do not go as far as some who say nothing is proprietary. I hope people use our work ethically and responsibly.

MG: Any model can be misused. All we can do is give it our best shot. Two things that make what we do less able to be misused are collaboration and the values underlying collaboration. If you make the process explicit and accessible and you involve a lot of people at every level from every function, you have a better chance of them making the process work for themselves. It is easier to customize something if it is clear. So we try to make things explicit and clear. We build agreements with the senior leaders on the values that inform the collaborative process. That does not mean that someone else could not use our work and throw out the values. They could do that. We struggle with this with some of our clients. Bottom-line organizations that are exclusively driven by the numbers do not easily see the value and potential of a collaborative change process. However, this struggle is one way for us to determine with whom there is a good fit, or with whom we want to work.

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RJ: I have been fighting a battle with a particular client where the leader of the change team is an old-line, hierarchical manager. He gets me in trouble because he says: The process is what we bought and we are going to do the process exactly as written. I keep saying: No, the process is a useful foundation, but you bought my ability to be a thinking partner with you in combination with the written materials. If we need to change the process we will. We are thinking our way through this. We do not have a model that we apply without thought to every situation. We are not applying something by rote.

V/A: So you help your clients achieve real results through a collaborative methodology. Link this to traditional OD....

RJ: I do not spend much time with the OD Network anymore and the reason I do not is because OD often seems to be involved in navel-gazing at the expense of being relevant to the needs of businesses OD hopes to serve. I believe that the vast majority of people in OD do not know what keeps organizational leaders up at night, what these leaders think and worry about, what makes them tick. So OD cannot join with them and become strategic partners. I believe many OD people could not even read a balance sheet. How can you offer consulting services, reach out and ask people to do something that is not their natural bent, unless you know how business succeeds? That does not make any sense. OD as a discipline has a major flat side in that it doesn't appear to think about these things seriously.

OD seems to be pretty strong on the "who am I?" and the values part, pretty weak on an integrated theory reflected in practice, and abysmally weak in connecting to the most pressing concerns of the people who run organizations.

V/A: What excites me about your work is the notion of collaboration. So many OD people seem to think that OD is solely about change, not collaborative change. You have rediscovered an important element — the collaborative process.

MG: The means determine the ends. If change is not collaborative you end up with organizations whose people begrudgingly toe the mark and leave much of the best of who they are outside the doors. Clarity about the ends has also received less attention than it deserves. Why are we doing this work? What are we trying to do in the world? Is all this organizational change work just to make the stockholders wealthier? This is necessary but not sufficient. If we ask these questions, it is not enough to say to make the world a better place. What does that really mean? I ask myself that question nearly every day. At the end of Anne Frank's diary she says: I still believe that people are good at heart. I still believe that. I trust people. The how of the change is linked to the why of the change. If you involve people, and believe that people are good at heart, and they have adequate resources, they will do the right thing. So change processes, in order for them to achieve worthy ends and call forth the best in people, have to be collaborative.

I want to get back to your earlier question about the potential for our methodology being misused. This is why Roger, Lawrence Aykioshi (our business partner) and I build agreement on the principles of collaboration change with leaders. We push them to clarify what they are trying to get done, what is already decided, what is not decided, and what is open. We ask them whether they are willing to test their assumptions about who they are and what they are trying to do in the world. I think we are getting braver and more skillful at doing this. I watch what happens to the leaders throughout the whole process. Leaders can start out with their hearts open and then become frightened because they hear information they do not want to hear or information they do not want their stockholders to hear. Change processes really test their mettle. They test the consultants, too. It is imperative that we push for explicit agreements about what is within the bounds and what is not, what they are afraid of, what they want in their lives, what legacy they want to leave — all those conversations have to go on. Do they agree with the Principles of Collaborative Change? If not, then we are not the right people to work with them. Others could use our process to manipulate clients but not for very long. People are not stupid. If the process is billed as collaborative and it really isn't and if the principles are not followed ethically and lovingly, people quickly figure this out. Clearly, given how explicit and accessible we have made the methodology, we have decided to bet on the goodness of people.

V/A: So false OD destroys itself?

MG: I think so.

V/A: The struggle is always to keep the integrity of the process. To understand what you and your colleagues are doing and then to talk about it, to make it explicit. And to share it in more than a marketing orientation.

RJ: I believe that you have to be a relatively evolved human being to do this kind of work really well. The people I most admire are those who have spent their lives trying to understand who they are and what they believe in. They have developed a level of integrity I deeply respect. When they come in to a client organization they are bringing more than a tool kit and a practice theory. They bring a human being that you want to be around, who has thought about the relationship of self and work, about who they are, and where they need to develop themselves. If consultants do not have the values we have, then our materials are not going to be a lever for them. Our materials are grounded in beliefs about collaboration; if you do not believe in collaboration, you would never do things the way we do. So I am not worried about anybody stealing our work. If it is useful to our colleagues, then I say, great! I hope they can use it. That would be wonderful. If we have anything to offer, let us get it out there and let people do what they can with it.

V/A: What is your present thinking, what is not on paper?

MG: We are doing a book with Ken Blanchard, taking everything we know about the major streams of activity in organizations and building a handbook for managers and executives who are seriously considering something substantially larger than incremental change. We are building on the concepts from Ken Blanchard's current book — Mission Possible — integrating them with ours and raising the bar on why and how to change organizations. We are evolving and documenting our thinking about implementation. We have three or four years of hard experience in that arena and it has never been written down. We are also developing and documenting our thinking about what is required of leaders to create change from the beginning of a change effort all the way through to implementation. We have been less than adequate in understanding and communicating what we believe is the required level and type of leadership development that has to go along with an initiative to create profound change.

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RJ: We are developing relationships with other firms that will allow those of us who have the most experience with the methodology to do more strategic work during change efforts. Having other people to do the blend of the technical and process work will allow us to deliver more efficiently for our clients. We are currently figuring out how to take our methodology and their technical capabilities and blend those so we can in fact deliver both the huge transformational change that

people want from us, as well as the quick wins. Many of the changes that clients make do not pay off immediately. They are often fixing fundamental deficits in the way they do business. For clients to make a big investment in the long-term viability of the organization, we also have to deliver something that has an immediate payback. I have become convinced that in this world there are damn few executives under the pressures they have to live with who will undertake a long-term development program without something to show in the short term.

V/A: In listening to both of you, you have learned a lot from listening to your clients. It is an attitude that Edgar Schein talked about in his recent V/A interview, the original meaning of process consulting. What is it you have come to appreciate that you did not know twenty years ago?

> Leaders can start out with their hearts open and then become frightened because they hear information they do not want to hear.

RJ: I think we know a lot more about how organization change naturally occurs in organizations. We have a pretty good feel for how organizations operate. I think there is a fairly narrow range of operating styles in organizations. Occasionally you get a Ben & Jerry's or a Levi Strauss & Co., but they are the exceptions. I think we know more about what it is that does keep CEOs up at night, what drives them. We are much more aware of what matters to them as human beings, but often they are not able to focus on this in the day-to-day world of running a business. We introduce to our clients new possibilities about integrating what they care about as human beings with what they are about as organizational leaders. There is a tremendous obligation that goes with that. To introduce possibilities flippantly or arrogantly and not take very seriously the responsibility for helping people approach a different way of thinking or a different way of being is unacceptable. It is not ethical. For me that means I can only do so much. It requires everything I have got to act responsibly on that obligation. I think I know what it takes for me to act responsibly. I can't show up without everything I know focused to do my best job. I can't work in organizations where I don't care about the people.

I have also learned that the work of developing the foundation for change cannot be short circuited. It is a difficult edge to walk. We have written down what we believe and therefore it looks like a product, it looks like the only way we know how to work. So when clients call us and say: Do that Collaborative Organization Design thing to me—we have to find out if that makes any sense or not. We turn down a lot of work because it is inappropriate. But it is tempting sometimes not to do a sufficient job of organizational diagnosis and working with the leadership teams of the various entities to ensure that ours is an appropriate methodology. In some places, we could have, should have done it differently. That really hurts.

V/A: I have a colleague in England who used to say about training, everything has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If the end comes too close to the beginning, nothing occurs. How much can you speed this stuff up?

MG: Our good friend Angeles Arrien says: There is no depth in the fast lane. So, I do not know. I believe that the answer probably lies in a combination of doing the analytical work more expeditiously and creating quick wins along the way, while slowing down to make sure that the deeper conversations occur, especially among the leaders, that lead to agreements that are clear, real and sustainable. **V/A**