

# Inquiry and Enterprise Transformation

**Dean J. Bonney**  
Graduate Student  
Johns Hopkins University  
dean.bonney@mac.com

## 1.1. Introduction

What really constitutes an Enterprise from an Enterprise Systems Engineering perspective? My effort to create a workable definition follows:

An Enterprise is a complex system of community, individual, and semiotic systems defined by the way its authentic relationships are constructed and dependent on the ways the parties to these relationships bind to one another. The imprint of an Enterprise is projected through its spatial identity, an identity that builds and maintains its currency through the positive images and authentic relationships it embraces.

As we inquire about the state of the Enterprise, how will we collect the data that will enable us to influence the desired transformation? There exists a hierarchy of inquiry that can move an Enterprise System Engineer's line of inquiry from focusing on the best solution to solving the problem (e.g. transformation) to focusing on visualizing a future that will enable the Enterprise to shift from where it is to where it desires it to be. To be proficient in this line of inquiry, one must become familiar with the architecture of transformational questions, the process for creating those questions that will acquire the data necessary for a transformational shift, and when and how to execute the inquiry.

This paper will introduce the Enterprise Systems Engineer to Enterprise properties that should be understood before a transformation initiative can begin, and will provide an inquiry process for beginning the transformation.

## **1.2. The Art and Science of Inquiry and Transformation**

How can we transform an Enterprise without first knowing of, then understanding its spatial identity? Enterprises come with no automatic markers for territorial or systemic integrity. An Enterprise's spatial identity is defined by the authentic relationships and positive images that community, individual and semiotic systems share with each other.

Systems thinking, both technical and social, are required to understand the dynamics of the Enterprise as systems, relationships, and images bind and unbind within the Enterprise domain. The domain of an Enterprise is bound by its spatial identity, and resistance from other Enterprises influences this identity. Using technology as an enabler can both transform and reform the relationships and images that compose an Enterprise's spatial identity.

### **1.2.1. Transformational properties of an Enterprise**

The following paragraphs describe the Enterprise properties that play a role in the transformation process.

#### **1.2.1.1. Enterprise Systems**

The author has selected community, individual, and semiotic to categorize the systems that, together, form an Enterprise. The spatial identities of these systems categories should have a high degree of affinity and form the Enterprise spatial identity.

Community systems are composed of community or subject matter experts and peer groups that organize, manage, and disseminate community data in support of both community and Enterprise positive images and their authentic relationships. Information exchange packages are distributed between other community and individual systems within the Enterprise. Examples of community systems can be found in the business operations of an Enterprise.

Individual systems consist of a single individual or group of individuals dedicated to promoting an authentic relationship or positive image within the Enterprise. An example of an individual system would be a set of processes whose outcomes consist of widgets that can be identified as an Enterprise product by external consumers.

A semiotic system is one that is symbolic to the Enterprise. There is only one semiotic system in an Enterprise and it embraces all positive images and authentic relationships that the Enterprise accepts. An Enterprise cannot exist without the presence of a semiotic system. An example of a semiotic system would be the Cross in the Christian religion. Any use of the Cross by Christians transmits a message to other members of the Christian Enterprise as well as to external consumers of that message.

### **1.2.1.2. Spatial Identity**

Space and identity are products of positive images and authentic relationships. The spatial identity of an Enterprise is bounded by the differences of its identity in relation to other Enterprises. For the Enterprise, that boundary exists at the point where other Enterprises resist the influence of its positive images and authentic relationships.

### **1.2.1.3. Authentic Relationships**

An authentic relationship exists for an Enterprise when it can be established that its systems are exploring and inventing together based on the relationship. Authentic relationships arise from sharing and acknowledgement, from regular expressions of commitments and values, and from trust and honesty [Harris 1999].

### **1.2.1.4. Positive Images**

Positive images exist as a result of the semiotic system that forms the core of an Enterprise. Positive images are not necessarily viewed as positive by other Enterprises. Examples of this include the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggle between communism and democracy. Each of these Enterprises embraced positive images that were anathema to each other. Most Enterprise positive images are expressions of its semiotic system. For example, the images of redemption and afterlife universally held by Christians are expressions of the semiotic system represented by the Cross.

## **1.2.2. Inquiry: Architecture and Process**

Inquiry is an acquired skill that assists the Enterprise Systems Engineer in identifying an Enterprise's spatial identity and the properties of that identity (systems, images, and relationships). Once this data set is acknowledged and accepted through conscious awareness by the Enterprise, it becomes possible to transform the Enterprise. It is the author's belief that it is the responsibility of the Enterprise Systems Engineer to facilitate, record, and influence activities that lead to conscious awareness.

### **1.2.2.1. Architecture**

The architecture of inquiry is based on its construction, scope, and assumptions. The linguistic construction of a question can make a critical difference in the success of leading an Enterprise to conscious awareness of its spatial identity. Think of the construction as a continuum that moves from less powerful to more powerful questions. At the less powerful end, questions elicit yes/no responses. The more powerful questions begin with how, what, and why. It is questions that begin with these words that stimulate more reflective thinking and a deeper level of conversation. A deeper level of conversation is required to unlock the unconscious understanding of an Enterprise's images, relationships, and semiotic purpose [Vogt 2003].

It is important not only to be aware of how words influence the effectiveness of inquiry, but also to match the scope of a question to its necessity.

‘Take a look at the following three questions:

- How can we best manage *our work group*?
- How can we best manage *our company*?
- How can we best manage *our supply chain*?

In this example, the questions progressively broaden the domain of inquiry as they consider larger and larger aspects of the system; that is, they expand in scope [Vogt 2003].’

The Author will continue with Vogt’s example of assumptions.

‘Because of the nature of language, almost all of the questions we pose have assumptions built into them, either explicit or implicit. These assumptions may or may not be shared by the group involved in the exploration; for instance the question, “How should we create a bilingual education system in California?” assumes that those involved in the exploration have agreed that being bilingual is an important capacity for the state’s students. However, some powerful questions challenge everyone’s existing assumptions. For example, ask yourself what assumptions the following question might challenge: “How might we eliminate the border between the U.S. and Mexico?”

To formulate powerful questions, it’s important to become aware of assumptions and use them appropriately [Vogt 2003].’

In the citations above, Vogt demonstrates the importance in being deliberate and premeditated in approaching and developing a line of inquiry that will unlock an Enterprise’s unconscious awareness.

#### **1.2.2.2. Process**

Vogt provides the following ‘game plan process’ for unlocking unconscious awareness.

- Assess the current situation – Conduct a situation analysis that includes some or all of the following:
  - Assessment or gap analysis of current and desired outcomes-based results
  - Meetings with key stakeholders to unlock and discover images and relationships
  - Mapping of resistance points that could influence the future spatial identity of the Enterprise
- Discover the “big questions” - Seek the core questions, usually 3 to 5, that, if answered, would make the most difference to the future of the Enterprise. This can be accomplished by clustering related questions and considering the relationships between them. ‘Clarify the “big questions” that the clusters reveal and frame these as clear and concise queries, not as problems.

Something fundamental changes when people begin to ask questions together – they go beyond the normal stale debate about problems that passes for strategy in many Enterprises [Vogt 2003].

- Create images of possibility – Creating vivid images of possibility begins the process of transforming to new positive images. These images can be visualized through the use of the ‘art of the long view’ process where different stories of the future are created by the 3 to 5 questions posed.
- Evolve workable strategies based on the new images to form relationships that will transform and reform the Enterprise.

By moving from a problem/solution paradigm toward a process focused on essential inquiry, the Enterprise Systems Engineer will be able to slowly transform the Enterprise from a future that reacts to stimuli to a future that achieves the possible.

### **1.3. Conclusion**

There is still much to be explored in the emerging field of Enterprise Systems Engineering. This paper provides a theoretical approach to Enterprise transformation that is based mostly on observation and experience. The process for using inquiry as a catalyst for transformation has been used successfully at the organizational level. It is the author’s hope that the definition and properties of an Enterprise described in this paper provoke debate about the essence of an Enterprise.

### **References**

- Harris, D. L., 1999, *Transforming a Social Movement*, The School of Cooperative Individualism, (Chicago).
- Vogt, E.E., Brown, J, & Isaacs, D., 2003, *The Art of Powerful Questions*, Pegasus Communications, Inc., (Waltham).