

Bringing Integral to Management Consulting: An Interview with Rick Strycker

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I came in contact with Rick Strycker around 2001 through a list serve on integral organizational development and leadership. Rick had recently begun working at JMJ (www.jmj.com) and was also trying to finish his academic work. We had a number of interesting phone conversations that gave me an insight into the challenges of bring an integral perspective into organizational life. Recently we got together to discuss Rick's background and work.

JR: Can you give me a little bit about your background?

RS: I have been at JMJ for the last 10 years. JMJ is a management consulting company and I am their Director of Development. That's been my job since I arrived here and the role is basically to ensure that our consulting practice is current and market-oriented, that we are designing and delivering work that makes a difference for clients. That scope includes both practice development and consultant development. It also has a strong element of Marketing Communication to it. I have a team that helps me fulfill those various accountabilities.

JR: What was your background before JMJ?

RS: I often talk about having 2 careers before JMJ. Just before JMJ I was a graduate student and doing several part-time consulting jobs. I had gone back to school in my mid thirties to do a PhD program in philosophy. I got about half way through and switched over to organizational psychology and ended up doing a hybrid program, putting together organizational change with critical theory and postmodern thought. I was in Claremont, California going to school, doing research, and cobbling together work projects related to my academic pursuits. I did some work for McKinsey on a research program that they were doing on the perceived shortage of good management talent. I did some research for Csíkszentmihályi, who had come to Claremont, that later became a book that he wrote on Good Work. I did some work for the Motorola University in the leadership college. I did that for about six or seven years, as well as working at the university for a think tank. I was doing this while supporting a family, so as you can imagine, I was pretty stretched.

Prior to that I was a small business owner in Portland, Oregon and I had a graphic design studio and I specialized mostly in high quality color printing and publishing, and was involved in the first wave of desktop publishing, and publishing to the internet. I did that for about ten years, from the time I was 23 until 33. Then I went back to school and did an academic track, thinking I was going to become a college professor. Before too long, I realized that academia moved way too slow for my appetite, then found my way into consulting which was my way to integrate my intellectual curiosity with my need to get stuff done.



JR: *When in that did you come across integral thinking and theory?*

RS: In graduate school. It must have been around '96. I was in a transition period between my philosophy program and my organizational psychology program. In philosophy my interests were already very multidisciplinary. I was interested in ancient philosophy, especially Greek thought. That led to an exploration in depth psychology, eastern and western mysticism, and esotericism. Suddenly, I got very interested in post modern thought, critical theory, feminist, queer theory, and so on. I was just kind of hopping around but then did some focused study in Whitehead, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. I wasn't exactly what they were looking for in a model student.

JR: *So in a way you were already kind of integral/transdisciplinary.*

RS: Yes, I was looking for that but I couldn't find any support for that in academia so I kept hopping into a group or into a department and what they wanted me to do was go deep into one thing, like you could be a Wittgenstein scholar or you could be a Heidegger scholar or you could go down into the roots of depth psychology (mainly to critique it), but don't mix them up. That was getting really frustrating to me because the departments really didn't talk to each other. They only spoke within their own discipline so the Kant scholars talked to Kant scholars, they don't talk to the Existentialists and they don't talk to the psychologists and they especially don't talk to the business people. It's just the way academia is set up.

So I was really getting frustrated and was walking through a book store and saw one of Wilber's books. It was *A Brief History of Everything*. It had just been published and I opened it up to the middle and I read a page and I thought "oh, my God this is somebody who's writing about the kind of things I am interested in," and just bought the book on sight, digested it and got so excited about what Wilber was doing. I loved his sense of humor for one thing because that was something I just didn't get any of in the world that I was in at the time. So I decided that I was going to change my thesis to something on integral, I didn't care what it was. So I contacted the only person I knew that was in California that would be connected to integral which was Roger Walsh. So I wrote a letter to Roger and he emailed me back within a few days and he said you need to get connected with Ken. He sent my information over to Ken and we started an email relationship within a couple of days. He and Ken and Don Beck had just recently met and I got into a kind of a three way email dialogue with those 2 guys and within, this must have been 98' 99' something like that, near that time Wilber decided to form the Integral Institute. He had just recently gotten a big grant, or at least the promise of a big grant and at the time he thought he was going to get 50 million dollars, and he pulled together about forty people that he thought could help him form the Integral Institute and that was the business group. I got invited to that group, mainly because I was in conversation with him at the time. So by default I became a founding member of the Integral Institute.

JR: *I know some other people that were a part of that it and I guess it has had a whole history of ups and downs.*

RS: That was my entre into integral. I did get connected with several other people where I could continue to grow. I ended up reading pretty much all of Wilber's books. The critical connection there for me was that at that initial meeting which at Wilber's house I met Geoffrey Gioja who was the CEO of JMJ Associates, and he and I clicked and started to form a friendship. To make a long story short he hired me about 9 months later. His main purpose, because Geoffrey was really taken with Wilber's work, was that he wanted to bring integral more into the business world and had already begun to introduce it at JMJ. So he hired me basically to help bring integral more fully into JMJ's consulting practice.

JR: *So no small task.*

RS: (Laughter). Some might say an impossible task.

JR: *Maybe say a little about the focus of clients that JMJ was and is working with.*

RS: Let me say something first on the nature of the impossible task. It is one thing to find a group of people who are already interested in integral and have read the material and are looking for ways to apply it to work and then pull those people together and form an integral consulting company. It is another thing to come into a company that is already 15 years old and well established in what they do, who have had a taste of integral thinking, and then try to introduce integral to that group so that they really embrace it as their primary model for working with clients. That has been the nature of the challenge. JMJ was already established, had some successes, and had developed a strong culture around other models. Fortunately, those models could be correlated with integral, otherwise the task really would have been impossible versus just improbable.

So, a little about the work. Over the last 22 years at JMJ we have mostly worked in major capital projects all over the world. A major capital project typically runs from two hundred million dollars and up, but for us projects have gotten much bigger over the years. A small one for us now is a five hundred million dollar project. Many of them are a billion dollars or bigger and we are working on projects now that go from five to twenty billion dollars and so these projects can have budgets larger than several countries' total GDP.

If you visualize around the world where there is major infrastructure being built, that is where we are. In the middle east, although we don't work in Iraq, but we do work in the Persian gulf in Doha and in Qatar, around Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia.. We work off the west coast of Africa where there is a lot of oil and we work in southern Africa in mining, and we work in Australia in oil and gas and mining and also Asia in oil and gas and mining. In North America and Europe, our work is more mixed, and includes oil and gas, construction, mining and manufacturing. We work with pharmaceuticals and semi conductor manufacturers, but those are mostly on their capital expansion projects. We are beginning to get some interest from their operating sites as well. A lot of our work is in heavy industry, and a lot of that is in the extracting industries – gas and mining, taking

substances out of the earth – primary industry/resource extraction. Of course, that’s a bit of an overgeneralization, but it’s a big piece of the work we do.

The important thing to say about our work and the way it has evolved over the last 10 to 15 years especially, is that we have gravitated from project execution and leadership team alignment towards high-performance safety, which is really about making sure on these major capital projects that people don’t get hurt. Not only that they don’t get killed but that nobody gets hurt. This involves a fundamental transformation in the thinking, beliefs and ultimately actions of all the people involved in the project – to shift from a mindset of keeping your accidents within an “acceptable” range to a commitment to the elimination of all accidents and injuries. If you can imagine the size and complexity of the projects, you can see how that can be a major undertaking.

JR: That is where I remember us first getting in touch. I encountered you on a list serve and you were looking about having someone work with you while you were finishing your dissertation. You were doing primarily safety prevention work, not accident reduction, using an explicitly integral framework.

RS: Yes that’s right.

JR: What kind of foundation in the practice at JMJ existed that helped enable you to stretch it into a more integral approach?

RS: That is a great question. I think that there was a good foundation already in place to be able to build an integral framework onto. It was never about replacing what JMJ did with integral but about actually expanding and building a more integral approach to what was already occurring here, building on the successes. The roots of JMJs work were based in the transformational approach that had grown out of the human potential movement. That approach was explicitly designed to shift people’s relationship to work and to life in general from one in which results were generated from merely working harder to one in which results were understood as a function of how the world occurs for people. In other words, it had a strong constructionist element, and its strength was that the approach reoriented people from a mindset wired for extrinsic motivation, objectivity and prediction to one of intrinsic motivation, interiority, and unpredictable outcomes. It gave dignity to the subjectivity of human beings and focused on the process of human meaning making as the source of unimaginable creativity and breakthrough.

JR: So as you say the foundation was there. What kind of work did you do then to help take it to the next step?

RS: The work at JMJ was grounded in transformational work, and more explicitly Heidegger, phenomenology, constructionism, and a particular kind of linguistic orientation. Because of that, the language in the approach could get very bogged down with jargon, which from the client’s perspective could sound pretty bizarre; we at JMJ referred to it as a practical ontology, to keep it brief. That is accurate and it is an

interesting way to say it, but when you say that to a client then you have to say a whole lot more to explain what you mean by it.

JR: *I am a bit familiar with that as Steve March applied that approach in his work.*

RS: He did. He worked with Fernando Flores' models a bit, who was somebody who also contributed to the transformational consulting school and also drew heavily from Heidegger. It is a very powerful methodology and there's a lot you can accomplish with it but you really can get bogged down in the terminology if you're not careful. So bringing in the integral approach in the beginning was really more about simplifying and making a more elegant presentation of the same basic ideas. So rather than talking about a "world occurring," we can shorten that to a right hand, left hand conversation where the right hand is the world of facts and measurements and the left hand is the domain of values, interpretations, meanings, etc.

JR: *I remember Steve March describing a kind of communication ontology that they were successfully using but it did sound like a lot of work and a lot of education to get people into the lingo and the jargon.*

RS: It takes a lot of work. So for example in that school we would talk a lot about *being* versus *doing* and the *being of human being* as the source of new thinking or possibility. The conversation was a way of shifting a person out of the conventional mode of thinking and into the realm of possibility. The trick was to get beyond the mere concept of possibility and to experience possibility as the source of new action. Again, if you get into Heidegger's work you can see how that can take you into genuine depth but it can also take you out of the world where everyday people live and work. It is just so much more elegant to talk about four quadrants, one half being the objective world and the other half being the subjective world. So it is so much easier to distinguish the importance of the relevance of the interiority using the four quadrants model. You could get more done with less work. We found both at JMJ among our consultants and with our clients that the four quadrant model itself is a very sticky idea, the stickiest among all of the integral and transformational models. This is because the primary way it gets used is right hand/left hand and when you do that most clients very easily get that their default orientation is so right handed and so objectivist, and if they really want to create new thinking and possibility or they want to cause something new to happen and it wasn't going to happen otherwise, that it is through the subjective world, through interiority, that they are going to get to something new and extraordinary. Almost universally, people acknowledge that they are weak in their relationship to interiority, especially when it comes to work. They don't want to be weak there and they acknowledge that they need help. That's really our entre with the client. I think with our consultants the more facile they got with the conversation, the more they just started to jettison the old jargon intensive ways of talking about it. It was actually the way integral started to get some traction.

JR: *And how long did it take before you got that more streamlined elegant presentation and you jettisoned the old approach?*

RS: I would say it is still happening. I mean there are still consultants who will flip over to the three circles way of talking – be/do/have – which is from the old school and some of them are able to mix and match both and some of them actually never learned the three circle version and they just go right to the four quadrants. But I think there are people who have picked it up really quick, within the first six months, and they just started adapting it. But I think it took probably good six or seven years for it to become the way we do it. So JMJ used to talk about ourselves as a transformational consultancy, then it was a transformational and integral company – integral was in the background. Now that has flipped and I think our self identity as a company is that we are an integral company and that we have a tool set that includes some transformational elements. I’m saying that as if it’s true for everybody and that’s clearly not the case, but I think it’s that way for most.

JR: *Changing culture takes time.*

RS: It does and if you look at our consultant population and if you were going to do a psychograph, we are like a lot of consultancies; we have people whose center of gravity is clearly postconventional, or “integral,” we have people who are a low integral or just on the threshold, we have got people who are clearly achievers, both on the high and low end of that scale. I don’t think there are many consultants who are in the low conventional range but there might be a handful. So it is an interesting thing that is going on where you have people who are coming from all different mindsets who are using the integral approach and using it in different ways.

JR: *This reminds me of the distinction that you turned me on to, between people who were able to think in an integral way and other people who were integrally informed. The latter had adopted the model and it held them and allowed them to follow the “code book” so to speak of integral to enact those things.*

RS: Yes, for them it’s a map. If you are integrally informed you get the map and you can pull it out and it can actually help guide you in significant ways. We have people who are clearly at achiever level who use the four quadrants very effectively, and they use it in an achiever way. We have now introduced developmental levels. I think this was another significant transformation in our company was to go from an orientation where transformation itself was considered bimodal, you are either transformed or you are not, you either got it or you didn’t get it. That was the way a lot of people related to it. So bringing in developmental levels introduced the idea of transformation as creating a journey rather than as a destination. That was very gradual, but it definitely has shifted not only the way we relate to integral itself but the way we address our clients. I think probably 10 or 15 years ago our work with clients was much more coercive. That is kind of a negative way to say it, but we would work with a client to have them commit to some goal and then we would have them get that in order to accomplish something significant you actually had to address who you are being as a leader in order to get there. So in other words you got to bring interiority to it. Then the consultant’s job as a coach was to make sure that that client didn’t give up on their commitment, that they were in full integrity with what they committed to doing. We held them over the fire so-to-speak

to ensure they got the result that paid us for. That worked, but it could have a negative side effect sometimes, which was to burn people out. But as the developmental levels came in I think we softened and gradually realized that for our clients accomplishing something is more of a journey and there is less judgment in it. We saw that it's not good to sacrifice yourself completely to get this goal and leave yourself without resources for tomorrow's goal.

JR: *I think what you describe has been typical of the whole process of integrating the integral viewpoint. At first we are proselytizing and you are either in the club or you are not, and only eventually do we grow into a more mature approach that recognizes that we are all growing and we are all at various places and how can we use what we know to facilitate and assist that growth at any place.*

RS: (Laughter). That's exactly right. This is one of the things I learned a few years ago about myself was that after I had been through a couple of significant transformational events and workshops, and I came out the other end and I felt like things were never going to be the same again. But then realized about 3 or 4 months later, this was my big revelation, that my ego survived my transformation. (More laughter) And that the same is true at integral. A lot of people who come into it, myself included, have this revelation, sort of like amazing aha experience, that you are in the club now and you look around and you feel like you've reached this place where you have finally found the other swans. Then after a while you realize "oh God, you know the ego survived this as well". And what happens is the ego starts to use integral to convince itself that it has improved.

JR: *It reminds me of what David Bohm notes in Thought as a System, that the defenses around the image of self and the world will find a way to incorporate any insights that may be genuine and transformative, but it will incorporate them and reduce our world down to its model of those insights rather than any genuine transformative ongoing process.*

RS: Exactly. I think it's one of the interesting things about this work of consulting and using the integral approach for consulting. Because you know in order to be in business in this way the tools themselves have to be very instrumental, they have to produce results, the results have to be measurable, there has to be business impact. In some sense you realize that this is just another set of tools for doing business as usual, I mean it could be that. I have to remind myself from time to time that no matter what toolset you are using if there is a transformational element in them and I think that it really is in this case, it is a little like playing Johnny apple seed, where you have to make sure that the work makes a difference for clients and that the clients get that as real value. And at the same time there is this little subversive intention that once the seeds of transformation is planted in the client and in the client's organization that it might just take root and that from time to time a person may wake themselves up and find deeper significances in what they are doing, and find that they are more than their job, that who they are is more than their ego, more than the results that they get. So there is a kind of two edged sword nature to this. But you just can't start taking yourself too seriously or you will kill the seed and you won't get the result the client is buying.

JR: *I see that as well in the teaching I do. What we hope for is that at some point the seed will germinate and produce a crack in the person's world and suddenly some light will leak in and or they will stick their head up and they will say, oh things aren't quite what I thought they were.*

RS: It can be a little bit disorienting for a while. Interestingly, after that happens, nine times out of ten that person wants to come to work for JMJ (laughter) because they realize "this is so cool, this is what I want to do."

JR: *So my understanding is that in addition to the focus on these large capital projects and the safety orientation of them, that you also begun to move into the area of leadership development.*

RS: Yes.

JR: *How did that come about and what are you able to do, or how do you approach doing that for clients.*

RS: Leadership development is a key part of any work we do, whether it is safety related or whether we are doing a large intervention that's more traditional OD type work, or a major capital project, team building, execution or anything like that. There is a lot that we can say about leadership in general, but I would say the light went on for me about leadership when I was reading Robert Kegan's work *In Over Our Heads*, because I was looking at really trying to understand the attributes of the different developmental levels or mindsets and I was really honing in on Kegan's fifth order, which is his version of postconventional thinking, or integral level. I was trying to understand the attributes of that level and when he was describing leadership at that level he was pointing to Ron Heifetz, and said that Heifetz's work was the only work that he knew of that explicitly dealt with the developmental requirements of leading at that level. Everyone else that talked about complexity and dealing with complex leadership took it for granted that if you were cognitively bright you could lead at that level, and that it could be taught. Heifetz was the only one, and of course Kegan as well, talking about adaptive leadership. Or, in other words, postconventional leadership had an explicitly developmental component.

JR: *That your way of thinking has to evolve and adapt to the situation, so the leader's job was to create that holding environment for people to do that developmental work.*

RS: Right. So that distinction between technical problems and adaptive problems seemed to me incredibly relevant to the kind of work that our clients were facing daily. So you can use safety as an example, and the complexity of a multimillion dollar project is a specific case of an adaptive challenge. The project manager and the management team is faced with eliminating injuries on a major project where you've sometimes got 20,000 to 40,000 workers from all different nationalities, different religions coming in from all over the world, lots of pressure to deliver on schedule, on time, and on budget, but how do you do that without hurting a single person? Well we felt that the biggest problem or the

biggest failure was that they were trying to apply what they already knew. They were treating the situation like it is a technical problem. If they just got more safety glasses or enough hard hats that that somehow would do it. What they actually had to do was that the leaders themselves had to lead the learning at the organizational level – in other words they had to accept that it is an adaptive challenge and that they didn't already have the answer. We saw that this idea resonated in case after case after case. So we started to explicitly bring that work into our safety practice and other parts of our work. So it's a kind of underhanded integral approach to leadership that has become embedded in all of our engagements. For every major engagement we will form a leadership team and take them through a mini-leadership course with Heifetz's distinctions underlying it.

JR: *I had the pleasure of seeing Ron in Prague at the ILA conference do a couple of different events and I was also at a round table with him in Vancouver a couple years ago where he worked for a couple of hours for a group of about 8 of us, so I am certainly a fan of his work.*

RS: Fabulous. I think there have been lots of variations and different ways of interpreting that work. He has been around for a while now, yet in industry we are still introducing him for the first time.

JR: *When I was in the doctoral program at Gonzaga the conceptual framework was around his Leadership Without Easy Answers work.*

RS: Yes, it is a kind of foundational text for our consultants. There are a couple of foundational texts really. We have them read Wilber, we have them read Kegan, we have them read Heifetz's *Leadership Without Easy Answers* and there is some basic safety literature. I would say those people are really the foundations of the integral part of our work and those things supplement the courses and papers we've created that articulate our transformational toolkit.

JR: *Another question occurs to me as you say that. I have this experience of have graduate students and or masters of organizational leadership students reading these things and what I see is that simply reading it is kind of like scattering seeds like a shotgun effect and hoping some of them will take root. So given that these consultants are the people you are using internally to deliver the results to the client, what kind of things have you done internally to help those seeds take root? How do you help both those who naturally pick it up and can run with it to really go, but also to those who maybe need to be held by those frameworks? How do you help them to use it in an appropriate way with clients?*

RS: One thing we did was we designed a course called the Power of Being and the Practice of Transformation, which incorporates the Kegan four column exercise and some of the transformational elements of our work and a little bit of Heifetz. It is about a three day course and we run in all of our business units around the world. We did it last year three times, but we just keep running the course and put people in it experientially. Because what you are alluding to is that reading the material doesn't put you in the hot seat of personal development or of transformational consulting. We really want people to have

the experience of being able to see their own frames of reference or their own mindsets and get beyond them. You can't really help somebody else experience shifting from subject to object of awareness without going through that in your own experience. So we run these courses over and over and we try to embed those kinds of exercises into all kinds of development activities. You can't lead transformation until you understand the mechanics of it in yourself. Most people get there. We have had consultants who go thru that exercise, resist it and eventually leave the company, and that is not always a bad thing.

JR: It helps them understand if this is a good fit do for them or if it is better for them to be somewhere else. I'll send you a short chapter that my doctoral student and I submitted to a Jossey-Bass book that ILA is doing that summarizes a similar kind of work we are doing here. We use the TLC 360 to create a little midlife crisis then run them thru the immunity to change work.

RS: Fabulous, I'd love to see that. One other thing I'd like to mention is on this thread of integrating integral more readily into our consulting and how we use it with our clients. About three years ago we chose as a strategy to develop a set of integral assessment tools and we have now probably about ten different variations of an integral assessment. Including ones for projects and organizations, safety, leadership team, and individual leadership versions. We were able to sell this idea of measuring performance integrally, or at least through quadrants, levels and developmental lines. Our largest client decided they wanted this in all of their work, and what that forced is that all of our consultants who deliver for that client now have to become facile enough with quadrants levels and lines and the analysis of it to adequately deliver that tool with this client and any other clients that want it. This again was a subversive way selling something that our clients want then having our consultants develop in order to meet the delivery.

JR: The clients say they want it so you had better be able to deliver!

RS: Exactly right! We are about three years into it and we are starting to get a lot of traction with it. It is doing what I hoped it would, which is that a consultant which may not have been that interested in the more advanced integral tool kit up until now has gotten more interested. There is work in front of them that requires them to learn it. So it is pulling for a lot of additional development in that way.

JR: So it is a kind of natural evolution, which is great.

RS: I don't know if it's natural!

JR: Well, as you describe it one thing leads to another.

RS: (Laughter). It feels a little bit forced at times.

JR: So you say that having developed this set of integral assessment tools you are getting traction in terms of client interest and motivating your consultants to develop themselves

in these tools and the integral framework. Have these assessment tools also enabled you to quantify the benefits of your work for clients? In other words, can you point to bottom line benefits clearly enough that clients' get interested?

RS: First, it enables us to quantify perceptions and that gives us a baseline to work with in measuring value shifts. It also enables our clients to see the places where they need to go to work to shift their culture and practices. We have not yet correlated our integral assessments bottom line business results in but that will come.

JR: *Ok. Do you have an idea of what it will take to get that correlation made?*

RS: We have to have enough data across several projects to give us a broad picture. We almost have that now and the number of assessments we're doing is increasing rapidly, so it won't take much longer. Then we need to hire a crack psychometrician to run the statistics. It's not that hard for someone that like. I've pretty much forgotten what I learned in my applied statistics classes, so I won't be doing that work. Besides, I'm drawn to the qualitative side of things.

JR: *I look forward to hearing about that at some point. For now, thank you for taking the time to share your insights and experiences.*

RS: You're welcome, it has been fun.