

Nonaka's Theory of Knowledge  
Creation to Convert Tacit Knowledge  
into Explicit Knowledge:  
A Study of AIDS Saskatoon

A Thesis Submitted to the  
College of Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

AIDS Saskatoon (AS), a non-profit organization, has limited funding. Most of the funding and resources for the organization go into service provision and education/prevention activities, leaving little time for strategic planning. Essentially, organizational knowledge exists at an individual level, which causes concern in terms of sustainability, continuity, evaluation, raising funding, writing research proposals, and staff training. AS' operations are largely based on tacit knowledge, or knowledge that resides within individuals, and little of it is explicit knowledge, or knowledge that can be examined by and shared with others. This problem yields the following research question: How does AIDS Saskatoon convert their tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge? This research study examines AS' tacit knowledge and represents it in an explicit format with the combination of thematic analysis and an organizational model.

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) method is employed to gather and analyze qualitative data. The thematic analysis reveals the mental models and beliefs that are taken for granted at AS and therefore no longer articulated among the participants but simply a part of their daily practice. A metaphorical model of AS, using Nonaka's theory of knowledge creation as a theoretical basis, is presented to convey some of the tacit knowledge that cannot be captured in words.

AS has had some challenges in their explicit knowledge documentation. This research takes one piece of their tacit knowledge and represents it explicitly through themes and image: themes articulated tacit knowledge at AS in an explicit format, and the organizational model framed the knowledge by using metaphor.

An important implication of this research for the larger body of knowledge management literature is that the overarching concepts in Nonaka's theory of knowledge creation were applicable for a community-based organization, where most knowledge management literature has focused on for-profit contexts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the College of Graduate Studies and Research, particularly the Dean, Dr. Tom Wishart, who is without a doubt one of the biggest reasons I completed this degree.

I would also like to acknowledge Interdisciplinary Studies for providing an academically rewarding environment where research can flourish without the constraints of disciplinary boundaries.

Thank you to SSHRC, the Centre for Knowledge Transfer, the College of Graduate Studies and Research, and the virtual College of Biotechnology for financial support.

I couldn't have asked for better supervisors. Dr. Grant Isaac and Dr. Dorothy Forbes provided me with constant support and encouragement; I will never forget the care and attention you showed to me and my research.

I also had the best Advisory Committee that any student could ask for; I'd like to extend a big thank you to Dr. Pamela Downe and Dr. Bonnie Janzen for their thoughtful comments and feedback. Thank you to my external examiner Dr. Michael Mehta from the Department of Sociology.

I'd also like to acknowledge Dr. David Hay my teacher, mentor, and friend.

Thank you to my family that gave me unwavering love and support.

My partner and best friend, Niklas Carlsson, was undeniably patient with me as I pursued this degree; I now know that after weathering the last 2.5 years together, you and I can survive anything.

Lastly, thank you to AIDS Saskatoon; this research could not have occurred without your enthusiasm and keen interest. Thank you for trusting me enough to take on this research and allowing me to learn about you, your organization, and broader social issues that concern us all but that you at AIDS Saskatoon have the courage, patience, and drive to address on a daily basis.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

- AS: AIDS Saskatoon  
CBO: Community-Based Organization  
KM: Knowledge Management  
PAR: Participatory Action Research  
PAS: People who Access Services  
SECI: Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization



# **1 INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Context**

This thesis details a research project that I conducted from May, 2005 until March, 2006 with AIDS Saskatoon (AS), a non-profit organization that provides services for people affected by HIV/AIDS. AS actively engages in education, prevention, and advocacy around issues of HIV/AIDS. The operation of the organization rests upon the principles of health promotion and harm reduction.

There are five full-time employees and numerous volunteers. There are nine board members. The Board of Directors oversees finances and other administrative actions. The organization claims little hierarchy, although formally there is an Executive Director in charge.

My association with AS began with employment as a contract researcher and continued for seven months until the contract was finished. I conducted a literature review for a research project initiated by the organization, which provided me an opportunity to learn about AS.

In discussions with the current Executive Director surrounding my research interests, we were both in agreement that once I started my Master's degree, it would be mutually beneficial for me to conduct my research with AS. I am somewhat familiar with the organization, AS provides an opportunity for me to explore my research interests, and AS could benefit from the research I conduct.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

AS, a non-profit organization, has limited funding. Most of the funding and resources for the organization go into service provision and education/prevention activities, leaving little time for strategic planning. I worked with AS on a project that began in February, 2003 and lasted until August, 2003. This association led to a combination of dialogue, observation, and reflection, which raised a concern by AS: the

organization has no clear and explicit understanding or documentation of what enables the organization to function the way it does. AS feels they have developed a unique organizational structure and philosophy that enables them to provide effective services but have not had the time or resources to engage in strategic planning activities that would allow them to document their structure and ongoing practices.

An important contributing factor to the lack of documentation is a result of significant organizational change in the last five years driven, in part, by a change in the nature of HIV/AIDS in Canada. The organization recognized that there were people considered “at risk” who were not accessing AS; they were not seeing street-involved people, injection drug users, or sex trade workers, and they also realized that, at the time, there were no other organizations for these people to access. According to reports by the federal, provincial, and territorial Ministers of Health (1999), the disease was changing from one that largely affects men who have sex with men to one that was rapidly increasing among injection drug users and Aboriginal populations. So, the organization has external pressures that contribute to changes and this change has not been explicitly managed.

Because the organization recognized that HIV/AIDS was changing, they also recognized that some organizational change was necessary to attract people to the organization who were potentially affected by the disease. The organization moved to a core neighbourhood, which provided easier access to street-involved people, who might not have access to transportation other than walking. The front office became a drop-in area where people could come in and have coffee and donuts, read the paper, or just relax on the couches. They also got a washer and dryer so that people could come in and do their own laundry. AS staff feel that the addition of the washer and dryer made a significant difference in attracting people to the organization. The offer of clean clothes is a major contribution to someone who might not have many opportunities to wear clean clothing. Because AS began to offer these services that could have a positive impact for some populations, there has been a gradual change in the people that AS is seeing over the last five years.

Given that AS has begun to see more people with less stability in their lives, less community support, and less immediate family support systems there is a constant sense

of immediacy and urgency to the organization's activities, due to both the people who access services (PAS) and the nature of the organization, which has limited staff and financial resources. This sense of immediacy leaves little time and resources to document an organizational strategy that accurately reflects the daily practices and goals of the organization. The lack of a documented strategy means knowledge of the organization's philosophy, practices and goals reside within individual staff members. Essentially, organizational knowledge (or corporate memory) currently exists at an individual level, which causes concern in terms of sustainability, effective knowledge transfer, continuity, security, evaluation, raising funding, writing research proposals, and staff training. The difficulty for AS is that their organizational operations are largely based on tacit knowledge, or knowledge that resides within individuals, and little knowledge is explicit knowledge, or knowledge that can be examined by and shared with others.

### ***1.3 Research Question***

In order to address the problem AS identified, I pose a researchable question: How does AIDS Saskatoon convert their tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge?

### ***1.4 Importance of the Research***

The study adds to the general body of knowledge by demonstrating how an organization can apply research methods to meet organizational needs. This research study adds to the body of literature on knowledge management (KM) by focusing on the non-profit sector, and community-based organizations in particular, rather than focusing on the for-profit sector, which has thus far been the emphasis for knowledge management as revealed through a search of knowledge management literature.

One of the expected outcomes of this research is a tangible knowledge product and processes that AS can access and use in future development of the organization. As a non-profit organization, AS has limited access to pertinent research. This project will not only contribute to a larger body of research but will also give back to the participating organization in the form of a tangible, relevant, and useable knowledge product.

Explicit documentation of organizational functions could provide the organization with a tool for evaluation, sustainability, and improve the clarity of research funding proposals. As a result of this research, AS may have a concrete resource that both improves external funding successes and the cohesiveness of the internal structure.

I use a Participatory Action Research (PAR) method that includes a focus group and face-to-face interviews with staff members and one board member from AS. PAR, by its nature and focus on learning through specific participants, negates the potential for replication of the work. However, it is possible to generate themes and processes that may resonate with other organizations and may provide a basis for further action research by other organizations facing similar issues. The thesis will seek to demonstrate the importance of understanding and clarifying an organization's theories in action, culture, structures, and functions as a way to sustain itself and grow. This will be of special importance to non-profit organizations that may have implicit differences compared to for-profit organizations. Ethics approval was granted from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

The next chapter includes a review of relevant literature and a discussion of the theoretical framework for the research. Chapter three describes the research methodology in detail; chapter four includes the study results, chapter five is a discussion of the results and a summary of the study.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Knowledge Management

My practical research question is embedded within the knowledge management (KM) literature. KM is concerned with making the most successful use of knowledge already residing within an organization (or intellectual capital), and in this case, tacit knowledge already in use on a daily basis at AIDS Saskatoon (AS). Intellectual capital encompasses human, structural, customer, relational, and social forms of capital (Bontis, 2002; Decarolis, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 2002). Essentially, intellectual capital refers to knowledge of the organization that can be embedded in people, processes, technology and other resources. Similarly, as Boisot (2002) suggests: “From an intellectual capital perspective, knowledge management is about the capture, storage, and retrieval of knowledge located either in the heads of employees, in the heads of outside collaborators, or in documents” (p.69).

It is important to be clear about what knowledge means. Knowledge is often confused with the related concepts of data and information. Boisot (2002) provides a concise and clear distinction among the three:

Think of data as being located in the world and of knowledge as being located in agents, with information taking on a mediating role between them. Data can be viewed as a discernible difference between different energy states *only some of which* have information value for agents. Where data is thus informative, it will modify an agent’s expectation and dispositions to act in particular ways—that is, what we call its knowledge base. (p. 67)

In other words, only some data are relevant for agents and inform their behaviour or knowledge. Therefore, data are shared or taken in by an agent, screened for relevance which becomes information and if put into use, becomes knowledge.

The purpose of this literature review is to give a brief overview of the KM literature. One of the dominant theories of an organization within the KM area is that of organizational learning. I will briefly review this concept and some of the ways that it

has been applied in the literature. The theoretical framework I have chosen does not oppose this concept of organizational learning but builds upon it by including the organization as a knowledge-creating entity. The final section will describe the theoretical framework for this research in some detail and highlight the reasons it is appropriate for this research.

KM represents more of a shift in thinking than a totally new theory or perspective (Conner & Prahalad, 2002; Grant, 2002). KM is associated with a knowledge-based view of an organization (referred to more frequently as “firm” in the literature) rather than the previous view of an organization as resource-based. A resource-based view of an organization holds that an organization relies on its resources and capabilities to function and compete with other organizations. Often these resources are considered as endowments that the organization is granted. The shift towards a knowledge-based view of an organization sees knowledge as one of the resources that the organization can create and exploit. There are varying degrees to which theorists see knowledge as important in an organization and various theories as how to best maximize knowledge as a resource but knowledge is usually seen as a means to achieve competitive advantage over other organizations.

Given that these organizational theories are developed in the business literature, neither view is fully pertinent to the non-profit sector; however, theories of the non-profit sector are few and far between and the tendency is to assume that theories of the firm can be applied to any organization, whether it be for, or not-for-profit. Theories of the non-profit sector often revolve around why non-profits exist, without looking at the issues of strategic knowledge use and management (Jackson-Elmoore & Hula, 2001; O’Connell, 1995; Patten, 2002).

Allison and Kaye (1997) and Drucker (1990) have produced practical guides for non-profits to undertake strategic planning and/or management. However, there is still a lack of research on non-profits to indicate how they can maximize KM concepts.

Although Drucker (1993) identifies a need for this kind of knowledge management in the non-profit sector he sees all organizations as requiring the same kind of management issues. While KM principles are applicable to the non-profit sector, the context of the organization should be given serious consideration; that is, it should not

be assumed that management strategies in the for-profit sector would transfer to the non-profit sector without some consideration for the difference in these kinds of organizations.

Despres and Chauvel (2002) discuss KM's lack of attention to variations in organizational types, or in other words, that KM literature often defines generic organization strategies, regardless of the organizational type. They refer only to for-profit organizations; however, it is reasonable to presume that KM strategies in a for-profit context would not be exactly transferable to a non-profit context, exactly as they are not transferable among for-profit organizations.

Teng and Hawamdeh (2002) argue that KM principles can and should be applied in a non-profit context and apply some KM concepts to a National Library Board to demonstrate its effectiveness. They highlight KM's usefulness and encourage the continued use and development of KM in the organization. Bate and Robert (2002) also argue that KM concepts are applicable outside business organizations and explore the use of KM in health care organizations. Their investigation leads to potential improvements within the National Health Service in England and Wales by using KM.

Exactly as variations exist among for-profit organizations, variations also exist among non-profit organizations. Often this diversity is not fully recognized and it has led to some difficulty in applying research results (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Anheier, 2000). To that end, I will identify here that this research is concerned with community-based organizations in the non-profit sector. It is not known whether the research results from this study will be applicable to non-profits that are not at least fairly similar in purpose and structure to AS.

KM is a fairly nascent discipline as it has only recently been acknowledged that society has moved from a post-industrial, industry-dominated economy, to a knowledge-based society, or one where information and knowledge dominate economic development (Bell, 1973; Drucker, 1993; Toffler, 1990). There are three streams in KM for the harnessing and management of knowledge: knowledge creation, knowledge utilization, and knowledge transfer. It would be a conceptual error however, to see knowledge creation, utilization and transfer, as separate processes. All three streams have implications for each other and there is no clear line of distinction among the three.

An organization's ability to create knowledge will affect the other two and vice versa (Choo & Bontis, 2002).

Within the three major streams, there are two foci in the literature: practical guides for organizations and/or managers and the academic literature, the latter of which addresses the many complicated dimensions of the nature of knowledge within an organization (Grant, 2002). One dominant theory in the literature is that of organizational learning. This concept is one that will be described here because of its predominance in KM and as such, was a theoretical possibility for this research. However, as this brief explanation will show, the learning organization is not the best fit for this inquiry.

### **2.1.1 Organizational Learning**

Organizational learning refers to a particular view that an organization has learning capacity. Although it is frequently employed in the KM literature, organizational learning is not a unified concept. The view of a learning organization became quite predominant when Cook and Yanow (1993) declared that an organization has its own learning capacity, that is, it is not only individuals that learn in an organization - nor does an organization simply apply individual learning processes - but the organization itself has a learning capacity.

March (1991) and March and Levithal (1993) use the concept of organizational learning to maximize exploration (knowledge creation) and exploitation (knowledge utilization) in an organization. March and Levithal (1993) acknowledge some limitations to the organizational learning concept, but suggest that expectations from use of the learning organization should be lowered instead of abandoned. Elkjaer (2001) documented one disappointment with a learning organization case study in which an organization consciously tried to become a learning organization but failed in its attempt.

Argyris and Schon (1978) are also often quoted as leaders in the development of the learning organization concept. They identify individuals in an organization as the "learning agents" but made a major contribution in the way of describing a reflexive learning process. Senge (1990) is another theorist that made contributions with his



theory based on the premise that organizations are learning entities. Sanchez (2002) furthered the concept of organizational learning by suggesting that there are different forms of organizational learning.

Another development in relation to the learning organization has been the conceptual link between it and Communities of Practice (COP). Lave and Wenger (1991) originated the COP concept as a way to understand learning and other activities of a group of people with a common goal. Several authors (Bogenrieder & Nootebloom, 2004; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi & Nicolini 2000) link the learning organization concept with COP.

COP could have been a potential theoretical framework for this research; however, it was rejected for the same reasons articulated by Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno (2001): “The boundary of a community of practice is firmly set by the task, culture and history of the community” (p. 24). Thus, a COP is a way for people engaged in the same goal to share knowledge with each other. Learning occurs in the COP but not the transfer of knowledge to people who are not members of the COP. The staff at AS, while all concerned with issues surrounding HIV/AIDS, have different roles within the organization. In addition, AS is not as interested in sharing knowledge with each other as they are in being able to convey their organizational knowledge to individuals outside the organization.

With the recent focus on organizations as learning entities, Grant (2002) expresses the concern that “efficiencies in specialization in the creation, acquisition, and storage of knowledge” (p. 145) may be lost. In contrast Nonaka’s (1994) theory of knowledge creation goes beyond organizational learning: “Taken by itself, learning has rather limited, static connotations whereas organizational knowledge creation is a more wide-ranging and dynamic concept” (p.34). Nonaka’s theory of knowledge creation, reviewed in more detail below, offers a more dynamic view of the organization and an exceptional framework for analyzing the research question.

## ***2.2 Theoretical Framework***

One of the best-known theories of organizational knowledge creation is Nonaka’s Spiral of Knowledge. Since his first foundational article in 1991, Nonaka has

further developed this theory in collaboration with several other authors. This section will sketch out the main elements to this theory, as it originated and later developments. In the concluding section, I will highlight the applicability and usefulness of Nonaka's theory to address the present research question.

According to Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno (2001) "The *raison d'être* of a firm is to continuously create knowledge" (p. 13) but "there is very little understanding of how organizations actually create and manage knowledge" (p.13). Thus, in contrast to the theories reviewed in the previous section, Nonaka et. al. (2001) do not see the organization as an entity that takes in new knowledge, learns from it, and then adapts practice, but rather, as an entity in a constant state of change and revision by a process of continuous knowledge creation and exploitation.

In earlier papers about the knowledge creation process, it is described as interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge through four knowledge conversion processes occurring in a spiral motion (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka, Takeuchi, & Umemoto, 1996). This model comes to be referred to as SECI, which stands for Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003; Nonaka et. al., 2001). The SECI model will be explored further in section 2.2.3.

The ultimate goal in developing this model is to provide an understanding of how organizations create knowledge so that organizations can then understand how they can maximize the management, application, and transfer of this knowledge. For the purposes of this research, it is only pertinent to focus on one process of knowledge conversion, externalization. AS has identified a need to understand how to put their practice into explicit form (externalization).

In the present study Nonaka's framework will be used to understand how an organization can, as efficiently and as accurately as possible, represent their tacit knowledge. This theory will be applied to formalize the organizational processes, which are largely tacit in nature. The underlying question for this research is how to make tacit knowledge explicit, and Nonaka's SECI model and related components provide a clear possibility for answering that question.

For the purposes of this research, there were some concepts that were not addressed, such as: autonomy, creative chaos, and redundancy, because they are concepts used to facilitate the management of the knowledge creation process in an organization; they are not concepts directly related to the knowledge creation process. As already stated, the aim of this project is not to manage the knowledge creation process but rather, to use Nonaka's insights and concepts from understanding an organization as a dynamic knowledge-creating entity to, as accurately as possible, explicitly represent tacit knowledge at AS.

### **2.2.1 Knowledge**

Knowledge is "a dynamic human process of justifying personal belief toward the 'truth'" (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Knowledge is also relative to a specific situation. "Without a context, it is just information, not knowledge" (Nonaka et. al., 2001, p 14). In order to create a context, an individual engages in social interaction to create knowledge (Nonaka et. al. 2001).

Knowledge may begin with an individual but it is extended to the organizational level (Nonaka, 1991). Nonaka (1994) distinguishes these two dimensions of knowledge: 1) an individual dimension, where the individual is the one who forms ideas, and 2) an ontological dimension, where "communities of interaction" (social interaction among individuals) share and develop knowledge.

It is through sharing knowledge that an individual develops a context for the ideas that have first been formed internally, and a new form of knowledge creation occurs. Thus, knowledge creation occurs, not just at that individual dimension with an idea, but also continues on through "communities of interaction":

Organizational knowledge creation, therefore, should be understood as a process that 'organizationally' amplifies the knowledge created by individuals and crystallizes it as a part of the knowledge system of the organization. (Nonaka et. al., 1996, p. 834)

Nonaka's theoretical framework acknowledges that although individuals create a level of knowledge, it is through a social process that individual knowledge becomes organizational knowledge.

### **2.2.1.1 Tacit and Explicit Knowledge**

A very important piece in understanding the view of knowledge in this framework comes from Nonaka's (1991) emphasis, on not just the presence of tacit knowledge, but also of the value that it contributes to an organization:

Tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills—the kind of informal, hard-to-pin-down skills captured in the term “know-how”... At the same time, tacit knowledge has an important cognitive dimension. It consists of mental models, beliefs and perspectives so ingrained that we take them for granted, and therefore cannot easily articulate them. (p. 98)

However, tacit knowledge should be seen as complementary rather than in opposition to explicit knowledge. “[T]acit knowledge and explicit knowledge are not totally separate but mutually inclusive entities. They interact with, and change into, each other in the creative activities of human beings” (Nonaka et. al., 1996, p. 835). This understanding of tacit knowledge reflects the current state at AS. They are often unable to easily articulate why and what their organization does. AS also has no desire to replace their practice with explicit knowledge but wishes to complement their current store of tacit knowledge with more explicit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is also important for knowledge creation. “Knowledge is created by means of interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge” (Nonaka et. al., 2001, p. 15). Thus, tacit knowledge alone, or explicit knowledge alone creates a stagnant situation where an organization may rely too heavily on one form of knowledge. This situation is undesirable because it negates the innovation process and potentially beneficial new knowledge will not be created or incorporated into the organization.

### **2.2.2 Dynamic Organization**

Much in the same way that Nonaka and others see knowledge within an organization as a dynamic process of creation, the organization itself is also dynamic. “A company is not a machine but a living organism. Much like an individual, it can have a collective sense of identity and fundamental purpose” (Nonaka, 1991, p. 97). So, an organization is not a static entity without any essence but a dynamic, ever-changing, adapting, knowledge-creating “living organism” (Nonaka et. al., 1996).

More recent contributions to this theory have developed the notion of a dialectic organization (Nonaka & Toyama, 2002; Nonaka & Toyama, 2003). The expression of an organization as a dialectic builds upon the earlier notions of an organization as a living being. “An organization is not a collection of small tasks to carry out a given task, but an organic configuration...to create knowledge” (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003, p. 9).

Nonaka (1994) and others (Nonaka et. al., 1996; Nonaka et. al., 2001) argue that the traditional view of an organization as an “information-processing machine” is an inadequate way to conceptualize an organization.

This static and passive view of the organization fails to capture the dynamic process of knowledge creation. Instead of merely solving problems, organizations create and define problems, develop and apply new knowledge to solve problems, then, further, develop new knowledge in the process of problem solving. (Nonaka et. al., 2001, p.14)

By taking a passive, static view of the organization, traditional organizational theories rely too heavily “on what is given to the organization—without due consideration of what is created by it” (Nonaka, 1994, p. 14).

Nonaka (1994) also recognizes the importance of an organization’s ability to process information and acknowledges that in certain instances, it is necessary to understand organizational capability in information processing. However, in a broader view of the organization, it is more important to see the organization in terms of its dynamic capabilities; that an organization is not only influenced by outside information but also interacts with those outside influences and dynamically processes information which creates knowledge.

### **2.2.3 SECI Model of Knowledge Creation**

The SECI model (Nonaka et. al., 2001 and Nonaka & Toyama, 2002; Nonaka & Toyama, 2003) represents Nonaka’s conception of dynamic organizational knowledge creation (1994, and 1991). The model combines concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge, knowledge assets, and context, the latter of which Nonaka refers to as *ba*.

The SECI model shows organizational knowledge creation occurring through a spiral motion by an on-going interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge with knowledge assets and *ba* playing a pivotal role in the knowledge creation process.

There are four knowledge creation processes (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et. al., 1996; Nonaka et. al., 2001; Nonaka & Toyama, 2002; Nonaka & Toyama, 2003):

1. Socialization, a process of converting tacit to tacit knowledge; (refers to tacit knowledge being shared among people as in observations, imitation, and practice that occurs without formal discussions)
2. Externalization, a process of converting tacit to explicit knowledge; (refers to tacit knowledge articulated into explicit knowledge as in building and sharing of paradigms and metaphors through formal discussions)
3. Combination, a process of converting explicit to explicit knowledge; and (refers to synthesis of multiple explicit knowledge sources as in building mission statements, and other strategic documents through formal discussions)
4. Internalization, a process of converting explicit to tacit knowledge. (refers to explicit knowledge related back to tacit knowledge as in learning through individual reflection)

However, because this research is concerned with the process of making tacit knowledge explicit, otherwise identified as externalization in the SECI model, that is the only process that will be described in some detail.

### **2.2.3.1 Externalization**

In early work, Nonaka (1991) refers to externalization as articulation (1991). But it is the same concept of a process where tacit knowledge is made explicit. This is an important process because once the tacit knowledge is made explicit it can be “shared by others, and it becomes the basis of new knowledge” (Nonaka et. al., 2001).

The first step to making tacit knowledge explicit is the use of metaphor (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et. al., 1996). “Through metaphors, people put together what they know but cannot yet say” (Nonaka, 1991, p. 100). Metaphor uses image to articulate tacit knowledge that cannot be easily communicated with only words. “It is a way for individuals grounded in different contexts and with different experiences to understand something intuitively through the use of imagination and symbols without the need for analysis or generalization” (Nonaka, 1991, p. 100).

Nonaka (1994) further states that metaphor is not simply a step but “it constitutes an important method of creating a network of concepts which can help to

generate knowledge about the future by using existing knowledge” (p. 21). Metaphor is also a connection between two unrelated concepts, therefore analogy is used to “bridg[e] the gap between image and logic” (p. 21). So, contradictions and similarities are reconciled in a metaphor through analogous thinking. The final step in this process is the development of a model.

Nonaka views this process as on-going in an organization. While that may be the case, in order to apply this theory to the research problem in this study, we must look at the way that metaphor could be used to make explicit AS’ tacit knowledge. So, externalization is being used here as a way to formulate an organizational model that will depict, through metaphor, the tacit, or experiential knowledge of AS, not just the tacit knowledge of a specific project or idea but the tacit knowledge embedded within the organization itself.

#### **2.2.3.2 Knowledge Assets**

Knowledge assets are important in the knowledge creation process because they represent the kind of knowledge housed in an organization’s members and within the organization itself. There are four categories of knowledge assets, which correspond with the knowledge conversion processes (Nonaka et. al., 2001):

1. Experiential Knowledge Assets;  
(tacit knowledge shared)
2. Conceptual Knowledge Assets;  
(explicit knowledge articulated through images, symbol)
3. Systemic Knowledge Assets; and  
(systematized and packaged explicit knowledge)
4. Routine Knowledge Assets.  
(tacit knowledge embedded in practice)

The knowledge assets that concern this project are those of experiential assets and conceptual knowledge assets. The experiential assets are those that AS is trying to exploit by gaining some conceptual knowledge assets through the process of externalization, or, making tacit knowledge explicit.

### **2.2.3.3 Context (Ba)**

Another important concept in the knowledge creation spiral is *ba*, which we can best understand “as a shared context in which knowledge is shared, created and utilized” (Nonaka et. al., 2001, p.22). The concept originates from a Japanese philosopher, Kitaro Nishida (1921; 1970) and was developed further by Shimizu (1995).

The concept of *ba* supports earlier claims that while the individual is the initial source of an idea, there must be some kind of social interaction to facilitate the knowledge creation process. For that interaction to occur, there must be shared physical, mental or virtual space (*ba*):

Knowledge is created by means of the interactions among individuals or between individuals and their environments, rather than by an individual operating alone. *Ba* is the context shared by those who interact with each other and, via such interactions, those who participate in *ba* and the context itself evolves through self-transcendence to create knowledge. (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2001, p. 22)

*Ba* further emphasizes the importance of context in knowledge creation. “*Ba* is a place where information is interpreted to become knowledge” (Nonaka et. al., 2001, p. 22). *Ba* provides the vital context where information becomes knowledge and where new knowledge is created. It is a recognition that individuals and organizations do not operate in a vacuum; they exist in an environment that impacts them.

### **2.2.4 Conclusion**

Nonaka’s theoretical framework, in both its original and revised forms, provides an excellent source of inquiry for this research. Nonaka addresses the key question of how to make tacit knowledge explicit. Even though he does so for a different purpose and in a different context, the underlying question is the same. Many of the related concepts that were identified in the previous sections are also useful for the present study and as data from AS is collected and analyzed, these concepts will form the basis of inquiry.

First and foremost, the concept of externalization will be used as a possible way to fulfill AS’ need to make their tacit knowledge explicit. Externalization relies upon the use of metaphor to make tacit knowledge explicit. One of the benefits of accomplishing this process is to be able to share knowledge (that cannot be well articulated) within an



organization with individuals outside the organization. Put another way, AS will increase their conceptual knowledge assets.

AS has identified this inability to accurately share knowledge of how AS operates as an important reason for conducting this research. Representing AS' practice in such a way that their tacit knowledge can be articulated in some efficient fashion could result in a number of benefits including an increased capacity for all facets of strategic planning.

Nonaka's framework also provides the basis for understanding tacit knowledge at AS. The focus group and interview questions will attempt to articulate, through themes, the mental models and beliefs that are taken for granted at AS and therefore no longer articulated among the participants but simply a part of their daily practice.

Nonaka's identification of the organization as dynamic, and later dialectic, is also important. The dynamic element of an organization is patently evident in a community-based organization like AS, where problems are often of an immediate nature. Problems require a quick solution and often facilitate a new method or new way to solve issues in the organization and for PAS.

Viewing an organization as dynamic is also recognition that the organization has a relationship to its environment. An organization both reacts to its environment and has an impact on the outside environment. Again, this relationship with the environment is likely important to a community-based organization (CBO) like AS, which is partially in existence to improve, aid, or otherwise provide support for PAS. In order to provide effective services, there must be some understanding that the organization could have great impact on PAS, but that PAS must also, to some degree, dictate AS' work.

The concept of *ba* may also be a useful concept in this inquiry. If, as suggested by this concept, knowledge needs a context in order to be created, then to fully understand AS, the context of the organization and its employees must be explored. *Ba* also highlights the importance of my role as researcher in doing the research. By conducting this research, I am engaging in a shared context with participants from AS and we are therefore engaging in the knowledge creation process together. Thus, it will be important to keep in mind that whatever results from this study is not a static

representation of the organization at a particular time, but an emergent understanding of the organization subject to future change and adaptation.

This section has outlined some of the key components of Nonaka's knowledge creation theory and how they are important to the research and are potentially applicable in this context. Once data collection and analysis were completed, this theoretical framework and the concepts defined here were used to answer the research question and provide AS with an organizational model that represents their day-to-day operations.

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Design**

#### **3.1.1 Participatory Action Research**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a qualitative research method “that embraces principles of participation, reflection, empowerment, and emancipation of people and groups interested in emancipating their social situation or goals” (Berg, 2004, p. 196). PAR relies on the combined expertise of the researcher and participants to achieve two main goals: to produce relevant and useful research for a particular group of people, and to facilitate the use of that research by ensuring that participants are included at all stages of the research process (Berg, 2004).

There are four basic tenets that run through PAR (Berg, 2004).

1. It is a collaborative process between researcher and participants and participants are recognized as a valuable part of the research process.
2. PAR acknowledges the complexity and history of human beings as thinking, feeling, changing and adapting.
3. Each stage of the research process should be subjected to vigorous reflection.
4. PAR is a method that acknowledges the potential for research to foster change and actively promotes research as a change agent by making the research usable and accessible to participants.

These main features of PAR also form the basis of my reasons for choosing this methodology. From previous association with AIDS Saskatoon (AS), I know that one of the requirements for me to do my research with the organization is for staff to have some input into and control over the research process. PAR meets this requirement by including the participants as a valuable source of knowledge, recognizing that by involving the research participants, the researcher is better able to produce a project that

most accurately reflects reality for the participants and will be relevant and useful to the participants.

The second reason that PAR is appropriate is grounded on the assumption that participants are active agents rather than objects of study. Participants are engaged with the world around them and can actively and meaningfully contribute to the research as experts in their own modes of practice. This view is central to my research because I am rooted in a feminist epistemology, a topic I will address in the next section.

The third reason PAR is appropriate is its adherence to vigorous reflection. The reflection process is fundamental to reducing bias and producing reliable and valid research. Ultimately, this research needs to be relevant and useful to AS. To accomplish this goal the research must be credible by enhancing data quality through vigorous reflection.

The fourth reason that I chose PAR as the research methodology for this project is because it has social change as an explicit agenda. One of the reasons that I am doing this project is to provide AS with usable research that will ideally allow AS to improve and sustain itself.

### **3.2 Data Quality**

There are several issues of data quality specific to qualitative research. One specific issue is that qualitative research is not considered scientifically objective in the same sense that many consider quantitative methods (Berg, 2004). PAR is considered a political method because one of its main goals is not just to understand but also to foster some social change. An issue specific to PAR is its reliance on the expertise of participants. This section addresses these issues related to data quality in qualitative research, and PAR, and highlights the way that I produce quality research in this study.

One of the ways in which I address issues of data quality in this research is by approaching the process as reflexive. Reflexivity means that the researcher explicitly and systematically identifies biases and assumptions. The researcher must be able to articulate why she is interested in the research, why she has framed the problem in a certain way, what she wants to accomplish with the research, as well as how her own prior knowledge and judgments about the issue might influence the research process. By

making biases and assumptions visible, the researcher is better equipped to identify where and when the potential exists for interference with the research.

I began the process of reflexivity early in the research and continued it by taking regular assessment of my own biases and assumptions. By attempting to identify biases and assumptions in an ongoing fashion, I work to make sure that those feelings are kept at a distance from the research. Because this is a participatory project, I also have to engage in a reflexive process with the participants, which means that they had the ongoing chance to validate or refute my interpretations.

It is extremely important to emphasize my distance as a researcher from the participants. Even though this a participatory method, the researcher must retain some distance from the immediate situation by recognizing participants are experts in their own situation, but that the researcher is needed to provide a different perspective. My role is that of the “sophisticated barbarian” (Yorks, O’Neil, Marsick, Nilson, & Kolodny, 1996), which essentially means that I am an outsider to the organization but one with the ability and skills to ask pertinent questions and then interpret and relay the information in a meaningful way.

The outsider distance is important for this research specifically to avoid “romanticizing” the staff in the organization. I can, and should, understand the organization without internalizing the culture of the organization and making it my own. I can rely on the expertise of the participants to relay the culture and functions of the organization while maintaining a critical lens.

Another way to address these issues is to begin with a solid theoretical foundation. By having some basis for understanding the broader social world, it is easier to resist reducing the participants’ experiences to simple anecdotes. Because I have a solid theoretical premise, it is less tempting to let the experience stand on its own without imputing some greater meaning for the social world. Even though I recognize that participants’ experiences are valid, I am also recognizing that my theoretical interpretations are equally valid.

PAR is explicitly political and oriented towards changing and improving the social world for marginalized groups of people. Because of this explicit political goal of the research, a researcher must address how she is going to maintain a quality study that

does not simply reflect, confirm, or achieve her own political goal. There is always a risk of reproducing the very thing you have set out to find, some people express concern over critical research because of its explicit political goals. There are several ways for a researcher to address this legitimate concern.

First of all, when a researcher acknowledges a political orientation to research she does not have to imply that she has a normative solution to the problem. The political commitment should not be a source of the solution but a commitment to the participants; distorting or subverting information only limits the capability of the research to create meaningful impact. Therefore, one goal of the research is to enhance the capacity of non-profit organizations to use an understanding of the impact of their culture, organizational structure and processes as a way to be more successful in contributing to society. My commitment is to the participants in the research and ensuring that the research reflects, as accurately as possible, the current state of the organization so that participants have a meaningful interpretation to use.

Another way to address quality in qualitative research is for the researcher to apply the exact same skepticism to her own study that s/he applies to quantitative methods. Critical and feminist epistemologies have produced some exceptional critiques of the positivist tradition by being brutally critical about their assumptions. The critical researcher should expect no less when conducting her own research project and should be rigorous about critically examining her own assumptions. In this project, it is my intention to be rigorous about identifying and reflecting upon my own assumptions.

The researcher is committed to conducting research that will give participants a voice. The researcher might not always find that the participants have the same political understanding but she is obligated to provide a space for the participants' voices to be heard based on their experience of social reality. The researcher's job is to interpret these experiences in light of social structures and norms without distorting the truth of the participants' experiences. The researcher should be just as critical of her own work.

In addition, to enhance trustworthiness, I incorporated strategies such as an audit trail, systematic collection of documentation that allows an independent auditor to come to the same findings, as well as member checks, provision of feedback to participants regarding findings who then had a chance to provide reactions.

In sum, to address issues of quality research in qualitative methods the researcher needs to rigorously reflect upon her own biases and assumptions, recognize the context as existing outside of the researcher and with the participants, begin with a solid theoretical basis, and recognize an ethical commitment to produce high quality research for the participants who have given their time and energy to participate.

### **3.2.1 Epistemological Framework**

Before I started this research, I outlined an epistemological framework for myself. It was important to me as part of the reflective process that ensures data quality to examine my own assumptions. It was important to identify and relate these assumptions to this research project because my interpretations and analysis are intricately linked to the feminist epistemology as I outline below. This section is not meant to imply that there is one feminist epistemology but rather to reflect my epistemological assumptions about the research process. Even though feminist epistemology has been typically used as a way of theorizing knowledge issues that surround gender, I am applying it here as a general epistemological view without necessarily relating it to gender issues.

One of the most important epistemological assumptions in a feminist orientation to research is that the researcher readily acknowledges that she not only has biases, assumptions, values, and beliefs that could influence the research, but that in acknowledging these traits, the research will be stronger. The research is strengthened because she has explicitly identified the reasons why the research is important on a personal level; in so doing the researcher is equipped with the knowledge needed to resist confirming existing beliefs (Code, 1992).

This assumption is important to this project because I have a prior association with AS that left me with certain impressions about the organization. Fundamentally, I believe that AS' harm reduction and health promotion approaches are effective and appropriate.

Another epistemological assumption is that the research is being done in order to bring about some change regarding a social problem; that being the lack of explicit knowledge for an organization with limited resources. This assumption is particularly

pertinent in this research because it means that I should not look for the positives and negatives in AS' practice but look at how things are happening, regardless of a value attachment.

It became important to be aware of my impressions and assumptions about the organization when I was analyzing and interpreting the interview transcripts. I had to constantly remind myself that this project was not about evaluating AS. It does not matter whether or not I think what they are doing is appropriate, what matters is to describe the organization as *it is*, not as what I think it *should be*. Ultimately, if I misrepresented the organization then the research would be less valuable to AS.

Researchers in the feminist traditions value alternative ways of knowing, including emotion and intuition, and see them as a legitimate way to understand different realities. Feminist epistemology opposes conventional epistemological wisdom in its claim to a knowable, objective social reality (Sprague and Zimmerman, 2004). Objective reality cannot account for the realities of people on the margins. Therefore, one objective, knowable reality is discarded in favour of multiple realities; different people live in different realities.

Remembering that there are different ways of knowing was crucial in the interview process. Different people express themselves differently, even though they might be expressing similar sentiments. It was also important for recognizing that whatever participants were expressing about practice at AS is legitimate, regardless of what kind of knowledge it is based on.

This difference in social realities also applies to me as the researcher. It is unlikely that the researcher will share the same reality as the participants. Therefore, the researcher makes the assumption that there could be a perceived, or real, power differential between her and the participants. As such, the researcher works very diligently at diminishing this power differential to build a relationship based on mutual trust and respect with the participants.

In the research with AS, the notion of mutual respect and trust is important in order to establish a sense of collaboration. Mutual respect and trust is also essential to foster honest and forthcoming behaviour and responses. Diminishing real or perceived power differentials through mutual respect and trust is also important so that anyone



who has concerns or issues can feel comfortable in raising them and discussing them openly. I tried to demonstrate with language and action that this project is as much about AS as it is about me completing my Master's degree.

### **3.3 Participants**

The sample is a purposive convenience sample. There are five full-time staff members at AS and nine board members. All of the full-time staff were given the opportunity to participate in a focus group and a face-to-face interview. I selected, in consultation with the Executive Director, one board member to be invited to participate in the focus group and in a face-to-face interview. The Executive Director suggested a board member she thought was most likely to be interested in participating, as well as a board member that had some meaningful involvement with the organization.

One board member is included in the study to provide some perspective outside of the daily organizational routines. It is only necessary to interview one board member because the objective of the research is to understand the daily, on-going practices of AS. Board members are not typically involved in these daily processes, but by interviewing one board member I should get a different view of the organization from someone who understands how and why the organization works, without being a daily participant in those activities.

Only four staff members were able to participate in the focus group, and the board member was also unable to attend. So, in total, there were four focus group participants. All of the full-time staff agreed to participate in an interview as well as the board member. In total, I conducted six face-to-face interviews. At the time of the face-to-face interviews, I was able to share with participants some initial impressions and interpretations from the focus group. Participants who did not attend the focus group were informed of the discussion and preliminary interpretations, and participants who did attend confirmed and added to my initial interpretations.

### **3.4 Procedures**

#### **3.4.1 Data Collection**

There were two phases of data collection, a focus group interview and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Data collection began with the focus group, which

occurred on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005. The proceedings were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Focus group interviewing provides participants with the opportunity to explore, as a group, some ideas and expectations about the research in a setting that establishes a more equal relationship between the participants and me, and among the participants themselves. (Berg, 2004). There was, in addition to the transcribed verbal discussion, some group interaction at the focus group that I was able to observe and document for use in the final analysis.

The development of the interview protocol was my responsibility; however, PAR dictates that the participants should have some level of involvement in each aspect of the research process (Berg, 2004). Therefore, during the focus group I asked participants about what kind of information is important to know for this study and designed my interview protocol based on their input as well as my own understandings gathered from the literature review (Appendix A). I took a draft of an interview protocol to the focus group for participants to give feedback on. Participants felt that the draft interview protocol reflected an appropriate and acceptable means of gathering information so no changes were made to my initial draft.

The second phase of data collection was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews occurred between June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005 and June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Each participant had the opportunity to review these transcripts. Because the face-to-face interviews were semi-structured, there was considerable flexibility in the order, wording, probes, and in clarification questions (Berg, 2004). Often participants answered multiple questions by being asked only one question. Also, depending upon the examples being given, I had to adjust the probes I used to get additional information. The ordering of the questions often varied depending upon the flow of the conversation. Sometimes it made more sense to ask the questions in a different order based on previous statements by participants.

The face-to-face interviews were needed as a follow-up to the focus group for participants to expand on ideas from the focus group and for me to elicit the stories that encapsulate the culture of the organization, as this is an aid to making tacit knowledge more explicit. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions about their

practice, the organization, as well as any other pieces of information that the members of the organization may have found pertinent to the study (Appendix B).

I found that the follow-up interviews were extremely valuable in conjunction with the focus group because the focus group gave people a chance to reflect on some of the issues before we met face-to-face. The focus group also gave me some insight into the organization before I met with people face-to-face, so I had some chance to think about AS and to formulate some ideas about what was important and meaningful to the organization.

The staff that were able to attend the focus group also indicated that they found the focus group extremely valuable to them. They told me that they rarely have a chance to sit down as a group together and when they do, the discussion is focused on operational issues of the organization. The focus group gave staff protected, uninterrupted time to sit down as a group and reflect upon their organization, how it works, how they work, and why. These kinds of questions are not at the forefront for discussion, even though staff recognize that they are important, simply because crisis issues tend to dominate.

### **3.4.2 Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this project is thematic analysis of the transcribed focus group and face-to-face interviews. I transcribed the focus group interview and did some initial analysis and reflection before beginning the face-to-face interviews. I planned to use the focus group feedback to revise my interview protocol; however, I found that the influence of the focus group on my interviews was more subtle. My interview protocol did not need to be revised based on the focus group but it did provide some insight and direction for some specific issues.

Data analysis was a continuous process (Singleton and Straits, 1999) so that I did some analysis and reflection after the focus group and after each face-to-face interview. Face-to-face interviews and focus group data were coded into themes using open coding and on-going note as themes emerged from the data. I interpreted the meaning of themes based on my theoretical framework as well as the data themselves.

After each interview, I listened to the audio recording and made some initial notes. Once I received transcripts of the interviews, I listened to the recording and made the necessary corrections in the transcripts. I read through each transcript multiple times to identify key phrases and also used the taped interview records to capture tone and emphasis. Once I had gone through each transcript and identified some initial themes, under the three organizational processes of communication, decision-making and organizational culture, I started a file for each theme and began to cut and paste phrases into each file. There was a lengthy process of arranging and naming these themes to reflect my perception of the information AS shared with me until I felt that I had accurately captured a cohesive, comprehensive representation of the themes.

Once I had completed the thematic analysis, I returned to AS to meet with all the participants to give them a chance to add, alter, or refute my analysis. Two participants were unable to attend the meeting. Those that did attend were receptive to the results. One participant indicated that I was “bang on” and another indicated that it was “eerie” how well I captured the organization. This feedback was important and indicated to me that I had compiled and relayed the results in such a way that participants saw themselves reflected in the research.

### ***3.5 Ethical Considerations***

#### **3.5.1 Recruitment/Consent**

Initial contact with the organization was made early in the project. The Executive Director fully supported the project and was instrumental in its development. In order to recruit staff participation without her encouragement or influence, I drafted an informational letter (Appendix C), which was distributed to the staff and board member by the Executive Director. The letter contains a summary of my research purpose, reasons I want their participation, an explicit statement that their participation is voluntary, and the date and time of an informational meeting where they could sign up to participate in a focus group and/or a follow-up face-to-face interview.

The informational meeting provided a chance for potential participants to meet me in person, to hear more about the research project, to ask any questions or voice any concerns about the research, and to recruit participation in the focus group and face-to-

face interviews without the Executive Director's knowledge about who has agreed to participate. Everyone who came to the informational meeting was given a form (Appendix D) where they chose to participate in a focus group, and/or a follow-up face-to-face interview, or refused to participate. The forms were returned to me at the conclusion of the meeting and participants were given a copy of their signed forms.

I explained to participants that the focus groups and face-to-face interviews would be audio-taped, if they so agree, and informed them that the face-to-face interview would be conducted in a private place and that no names would be used in the final report to maintain complete confidentiality. I then let the staff know that a signed consent form was necessary to participate, for both the focus group (Appendix E) and the interview (Appendix F), but that I would keep their signed consent forms, the cassettes, transcripts and any other interview materials stored safely in my supervisor's office in a locked cabinet, for a minimum of five years and that my advisory committee and I would have sole access to these forms, cassettes and transcripts in order to protect their privacy. I then asked if they would like to participate.

### **3.5.2 Transcripts**

Once all face-to-face interviews were transcribed, I emailed participants their transcripts so that they had the opportunity to review their transcripts in a private place and had the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. All participants who attended the focus group were also sent a copy of the focus group transcript so that they could comment and make sure that it accurately reflected the conversation. After they reviewed their transcripts, I again informed them that only anonymous excerpts from the transcripts would be used in subsequent written documents but that they may be identifiable to others on the basis of what they have said. I asked them to sign a Data Transcript Release form acknowledging that the transcript accurately reflects what they said in their personal interview with me (Appendix G). The signed Data Transcript Release forms were taken and stored safely in a locked cabinet in my supervisor's office. Only anonymous excerpts from the data transcripts are included in the thesis and in any other subsequent publications.

### **3.5.3 Confidentiality**

There are few staff members at AS, so confidentiality is a concern with this research project. To try and keep the participants responses confidential, I eliminated any reference to the position or duties they have at AS. The participants are only identified with female pronouns. There is one male working at AS but since he is the only male; he would automatically be identified by use of a male pronoun. So, in order to simplify the writing process, each participant was asked to choose a gender-neutral name and everyone is referred to using female pronouns. Also, throughout the research results section participants are referred to as “staff” even though I did interview one board member. This use is meant to conceal the responses of the one board member that participated.

### **3.5.4 Risk or Deception**

There was no deception in this study. Participants may be identifiable, given the small number of staff at the organization, so there is some risk that participants will be identifiable. To minimize this risk, all potentially identifying data were kept confidential, unless otherwise authorized by the participant.

Securing staff’s approval for transcript release also minimized the risk for participation because they have had the opportunity to remove any information that could be potentially harmful or misleading.

The information collected from participants was also not sensitive in nature; there were no questions asking for evaluation of AS or other staff members. Each staff member indicated their comfort in participating in this research and their understanding that, even though I did my best to conceal their identity, they all know each other well and it was possible they could identify each other.

## **4 RESULTS**

The following section describes the results of the focus group and face-to-face interviews. The results are categorized into themes. When this project first began, I identified communication, decision-making and organizational culture as key elements to understanding an organization. These three elements formed the basis of my interview protocol as well as the structure for my analysis. The themes represent the mental models and unspoken understanding that has become so ingrained in AIDS Saskatoon (AS) that it has become common knowledge, or in other words, they represent tacit knowledge at the organization. To understand AS, a person would have to internalize the elements that I identified in the themes.

### **4.1 Communication**

When this project first began, I identified communication as one of the key elements to understanding any organization. I had imagined that in asking about communication, I was asking about verbal or written communication. However, the focus group revealed that an important mode of communication for this organization is non-verbal. Therefore, this section describes two different modes of communication at AS: non-verbal and verbal. I will also incorporate some individual skills that participants associated with effective communication at AS.

#### **4.1.1 Non-Verbal Communication**

Participants felt that non-verbal communication occurs on a daily basis and that it is absolutely fundamental to AS because of the potential safety issues. Many of the people that access AS are street-involved and while some are known and trusted by staff, there has been a recent increase in the number of people coming to the organization, many of whom are unknown to staff. So, the participants agreed that much of their non-verbal communication is related to safety. One participant at the focus group expressed it this way:

Well, ...when there's something that could end up being a crisis situation like perhaps somebody in the back that somebody is uncomfortable with and we all know each other well enough that, well, you know, if I walk out here and I have a look on my face then...someone else knows, that, or perhaps there's someone around I'm not very comfortable about and could they please hang around for a bit and that kind of thing. So we do that kind of stuff.

Another participant at the focus group elaborated on that sentiment to explain how they transmit their feelings to one another:

We communicate a lot with our expressions, our tone of voice, like you just know those things you just get to know them on other people... if you're talking to someone who accesses services and that's sort of sketchy and you want to make that aware to someone else and they walk by and they're like, hey, and you do something like whether it be facial expressions...they know to be like, I'm either going to turn around and come back or I'm gonna work beside you just to make sure something's okay, everything's all right. And that is always flowing. Same thing as, we heard someone on the phone, even down the hall, like if someone is quite upset about something, or someone has come into their office, even tone of voice, you can cue other people.

Thus, because of potential safety concerns, and the inability to verbalize those concerns where there are other people around, staff often use non-verbal cues like body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions to alert other staff of potential concerns.

In general, this kind of non-verbal communication is always occurring, not just when there is a potential crisis situation but in the course of a day so that staff is always trying to be aware of their co-workers. For example, Skye explained the constant communication this way:

In the course of a day I can pass [other staff members] in the hall and I know, based on the look they gave me...what's going on in the part of the office that they're hanging out in.

Participants explained that quite often they "check-in" with one another or "touch base". For example, one participant explained this system of maintaining contact:

We cruise through the office quite a bit, which may sound a little odd but checking that everything's okay at the front, are there many folks here, does the sugar need refilling, going down the hallways, going by, and then, if there's something that's maybe causing us concern or you know maybe something happens that we need to just connect with, you know, we head to each other's offices or whatever it may be. We meet up again and then we run into each other in the kitchen, or two of us loading the dishwasher, talking, and so it's pretty informal but very much there. Like we really, particularly the three of us that



spend a lot of time doing this stuff at the front and keeping, you know, getting the laundry soap and signing out the movies and all that kind of stuff, probably connect, I don't...I've never really thought about it, how often, in terms of time, but keep a fairly close, like, I know whether, you know, one of them's in their office working on something and so, you know, then I kind of go by the other person's office or wherever they are and just kind of, almost, check in. It's not that obvious or formal, but it's just kind of a check-in sort of thing.

So, the communication becomes about keeping in touch with co-workers and making sure everyone is in contact, aware of where co-workers are, and how co-workers might be feeling. Thus, a lot of the work they are doing non-verbally is to be aware of each other and to circumvent any potential problems by maintaining a close connection among all staff.

In addition to maintaining close contact with co-workers, participants described the importance of paying close attention to their environment. A participant at the focus group gave this example:

The way this place is laid out, you do have to pay attention to, okay I know that today there are only three staff members on, I just heard someone go get the key and go toward the bathroom, the fan just went on. That means someone is in the crapper and they're a staff member. So there's only two people in the office right now. There's Christine out front and there's like client person X. I know person X is pretty stable and probably not doing anything but the front door just opened and closed. And it opened and closed in a rather loud way, which sounds like grumpy something is happening. So, all of this combination of understanding that there is like somebody's in the crapper there is only one other person up front, and the door just opened, means okay, now I have to make a judgment call, okay I'm getting up and going to see what's going on.

Therefore, staff try to be aware of each other, as well as the space that they are in and what is going on in that space.

Staff indicated that for the most part this mode of communication among staff is highly effective in a potentially dangerous situation. Morgan put it this way:

There's a lot of kind of joking around that goes on...especially in a crisis situation, or not even just a crisis situation. Maybe more just like a tense situation. There's a lot of sort of facial things that go on, you know, or stuff with the eyes, things like that and we can kind of get our point across a room and let each other know sort of what we might need or what's going on for us, that kind of thing.

Morgan also indicated her trust in the fact that if she was feeling uncomfortable or tense in a particular situation that, based solely on her body language, any one of her co-workers would be able to pick up on that cue. Riley also expressed a similar feeling of comfort and trust in her co-workers when it comes to potentially dangerous situations:

If we're out in the drop-in centre and something is going down, generally I feel like we all communicate well enough with each other non-verbally that I can trust that people will get what's going on.

For this kind of communication to occur, there has to be some ability in skills of perception. Morgan described how this skill seems to come about unwittingly:

We spend so much time together in such close quarters, and then spend a significant amount of social time together as a staff, that you really do get to know the other people very, very well. I mean, I could walk into a room, take one look at any of them and know what kind of mood they were in. It just sort of happens.

Riley also reflected on this skill but had a slightly different perspective on how those skills develop:

I think it's also a by-product of the environment we live in that we work with people who have this incredibly heightened sense of awareness of the environment and the people around them because it's a safety thing. They have to...We, in some ways, have picked up that heightened perception and awareness of what's going on around us and with other people in that, the folks we work with don't have a lot of deep meaningful conversations about, well, how did you feel about that. And so we've sort of gone to communicating in a way that's quite similar to some of the people who come in here.

Regardless of the way that the skills are developed, it was evident from the interviews that it was an important skill to develop.

It is important to realize that this kind of communication not only takes some particular skill, but it also requires a level of trust among co-workers that they will not only understand when other staff feels unsafe but will also respond to that. Skye voiced some frustration when, in the past, co-workers have not responded to these non-verbal cues:

You can make a choice at any time in your life to, "yes, I'm consciously aware of everything but I'm just walking away from it". You can do that. But around here, part of our job depends on our safety and our sense of...I'm a human being, you're a human being, you're not safe. If you're someone who fits in

here, you're paying attention to the safety cues or the personal cues that are going on non-verbally...if you really want to check out, you don't pay attention to the non-verbal.

Therefore, in Skye's view, not paying attention to non-verbal cues is akin to betraying co-workers and not fully engaging in the work environment. In other words, if a co-worker does not pick up on non-verbal cues, other staff interpret this as a way to disengage from the job and potentially from the reality for many of the people that come in to AS. "They don't want to accept the reality of what goes on in the world" (Skye) so that as a method of protection, simply tune out and do not pay attention to any surroundings, including the needs of co-workers. Many participants expressed a similar sentiment at the focus group in the form of disbelief that people could miss a lot of the non-verbal communication, which many felt should be obvious to anyone who is paying attention.

A by-product of this kind of non-verbal communication that emerged at the focus group was how alienating it could be to a new staff member in the organization. AS apparently has a reputation for being "cliquey" and in part this reputation may very well have resulted because of the non-verbal communication that long-time staff members navigate and understand well, but that a newer staff member may not understand immediately. Not understanding the non-verbal signals that others are giving could be an alienating experience. AS staff all seemed to recognize this potential but this statement from Riley exemplified the sentiment of the staff:

I mean you always feel like an outsider when you start work. I think the way we communicate with one another just amplifies the sense of, you know, us and them. I also know though that it is possible to work through that and come to an understanding of how things communicate...I think part of it is about security and confidence in yourself, that, I'm coming into this situation and I have a reason to be here. I have a role to play here.

One could say then that self-confidence and an understanding of the role and contributions a new staff member could make are helpful in working at AS.

#### **4.1.2 Verbal Communication**

Verbal communication at AS was described as "unstructured", "in the moment" and "fluid". Currently, consensus seems to be that when verbal communication in the

organization happens it is fairly healthy and participants appreciated the fluidity of the communication. However, participants did identify some challenges to communication at AS. Some participants expressed a desire for more time to communicate but they also readily acknowledged that more time to sit down with each other has to be balanced with the time they want and need to devote to the PAS. For example, Riley describes verbal communication at AS this way:

What tends to happen in the space is, when it's left to be informal, sometimes it just doesn't happen. Is that time doesn't allow and...it just keeps going and going and going and there will never be a time to sit. And actually, okay three weeks ago this happened and we need to deal with because we had to just keep going. We couldn't stop and have a meeting and discuss what had happened because there were ten people sitting there who also needed, you know, services or what have you.

Morgan also expressed a drawback with this kind of informal communication, which is sometimes "harried" or frenzied" and may only occur for a quick moment in the hall:

If you're absent for a period of time, for whatever reason, you don't know what's going on and it's almost impossible to catch up and find out.

Skye expressed her appreciation for the times when a formal meeting is scheduled:

We try to have more of a formal meeting once a week if we can. That, at least, gives us the opportunity to, in a larger context, hash out some things, which you can't always do one-on-one with people. And, that honestly just gives us the time to catch up.

So, the current mode of verbal communication may present a problem in that some people may not get important information because there was no formal time to communicate and by the time a formal meeting is scheduled, there are other pressing issues that have to be discussed, leaving some matters not discussed in a broader context.

Even though there is not a lot of formal communication in the form of meetings or memos, which is sometimes a concern, in general participants expressed their satisfaction with the effectiveness of organizational communication. In particular, every staff member indicated that verbal communication occurs in the kitchen and seemed to speak of these moments in the kitchen with colleagues with great fondness. The kitchen

has become a place to connect with colleagues and keep informed about daily activities at the organization. Leslie phrased the kitchen communication this way:

Well, we tend to gather around the kitchen and talk...the first fifteen minutes here are hectic in terms of getting out the donuts and the coffee and all that and then we kind of all, then we stop and have a cup and talk in the kitchen...And we kind of connect then. That's a really important time for us to connect and, you know, sort of how everybody's day is gonna go.

So, the kitchen has become a place where a lot of the work-related conversation occurs. Even though it is not a formal mechanism of communication, it is a valuable place for all staff to communicate with each other. Skye articulated the kitchen's importance this way:

[It's] like water cooler talk almost, except that it actually does have a lot of relevance to what we're doing in the day.

Riley elaborated:

Our kitchen is our gathering place. So staff knows, they want to talk to people, "do you want to come in the kitchen for minute?" And we all go talk. We don't have a staff room. ...it tends to be, we're sitting having a coffee in the kitchen and chatting about what's going on...

For Toni, the kitchen as a gathering place is important because it is a place where you get to know colleagues as people:

There's some sort of community that we've made in the kitchen that when you go in and you have coffee, we sit down and connect with each other, so we have a lot of background in personal stuff.

This connection with colleagues is very important when it comes to being able to communicate with each other about inter-personal issues:

We're very vocal and we can bring everything out. I think it's a level of comfort that we've reached...I guess it's the amount that we actually share with each other...So when something is bothering us we feel comfortable saying it. So every now and then when an issue is pressing or you know, we need to...set aside a meeting so that we can talk. But for the most part we don't, we don't set up anything. It just happens.

Therefore, the kitchen is important not only because staff use the space to connect with one another about work issues but also because the kitchen has provided a comfortable atmosphere for staff to connect on a personal level as well. The fact that staff know each

other on a personal level has made communicating with one another easier because they feel comfortable expressing themselves.

In addition to the personal comfort staff feel with each other, which makes communication effective, other staff also indicated that the fact that AS is not hierarchical makes it easy to communicate with staff members. Staff suggested that because they are not concerned that they will be reprimanded or fired for sharing an opinion, it makes it easier to be open and honest. Also, because staff feel that their opinions are valued, they do not hesitate to share with colleagues, even if opinions are divergent. In fact, it seems to be seen as an obligation to share an opinion for the benefit of the whole organization. For example: when AS does the budget, each staff member participates in that process. Every staff member is expected to contribute to that process because they all have something to contribute and issues may be raised that others have not thought of while budgeting for the organization.

## **4.2 Decision-Making**

Decision-making at the organization seems to take two forms. On the one hand it can be independent but on the other hand, it can also be collaborative. Decision-making at an individual level mostly revolves around the individual positions at AS. Leslie highlighted the independence with which many decisions are made, which contributes to her satisfaction with working at AS:

I've had an enormous amount of freedom in terms of how I do my job on a day-to-day basis. And I don't think I'd get that very many other places. I mean, I can talk with [different people] and someone comes up with an idea and I can just say, that's sounds great, why don't we try that? ...I have nobody standing over me day-to-day saying "well you didn't do this or you should do that". I have a really, really enormous amount of freedom to do this job the way that I think it should be done.

Therefore, decisions can be made quite independently in terms of the day-to-day operation and concerns in a particular position. Staff have to take responsibility for their positions and make a great deal of independent decisions.

Participants, both at the focus group and individual interviews, also expressed independence in decision-making in terms of taking initiative to do tasks that need to be done. This kind of decision-making at AS is independent in the sense that individual

staff members are in control of how much, or how little, they will contribute to the organization outside of an official job description. One participant at the focus group expressed this initiative by giving an example of a particular incident:

When somebody started, you know, it was during one of our big fundraising events and the position this person has been hired on for had nothing to do with fundraising whatsoever, and even historically, didn't have much of a role to play in this event, but I mean, she started, we were doing work, the work needed extra people to help out. You know, she just stepped in and helped. It wasn't a matter of, like, well, I can't stay an hour late...like she helped, but at the same time it wasn't like, oh well, you know, my partner at home is planning a birthday party for my friends, but you know, I have to stay and work because I'm just helping out...there's balance, it's like, I'll help out as much as I can...towards a common goal. Whereas we've also had people who work here and, they come in at 9:00. At 12:00 they go out for lunch. At 12:45 they come back to the office. They go stand in the bathroom, or something, for 15 minutes and leave the bathroom at 12:59 and come back out, sit at their desk, do their thing and leave at 5:00.

The ability to take initiative is viewed as a valuable skill. If people who come to the organization fail to pick up on additional tasks and take some initiative, then they can be viewed as disengaged from the organization. A focus group participant gave this example:

It's kinda like, the cheesy, sort of, pioneer spirit of small town western Canada, you know, where everybody pitches in and helps out. Like when there's a death in the neighbourhood, everybody brings peach cobbler, like that kind of thing. That sort of intangible Saskatchewan lets-put-together-a-cookbook about everything. It somehow works here too. It's like the people who get a job here or are hired on here and end up staying here or end up not leaving here and everybody having a party because they're gone, after they're gone. Are the people who step in and, it's like, they're well-balanced. I don't mean they, avail themselves to oh, let me go change your oil for you too because you're my best friend. But they're people who step in and do what needs to be done, kind of thing around here. It's like, "yes, my job description is I'm the photocopy technician, so I cannot do anything except stand by the photocopier and wait for the photocopying machine to be used". You know, like people who actually go, well, this person who I can see walking across the room is carrying 60 cups of coffee. They might need some help. Why don't I get up my fat ass and go help them? And I don't expect any reward or recompense for that in any sense, but it's just the thing to do.

Thus, a person who does not recognize and respond to the needs of individuals around them it can be perceived as indifferent or as possessing an uncaring attitude.

In addition to independent decisions, there is also a significant amount of decision-making that was described to me as collaborative. Decisions that will impact the organization, even if technically one person's decision to make, are often made on a basis of consultation with other staff members. However, the collaborative nature of decision-making is not always that clear. Riley gave this example:

Sometimes it's, I come in the kitchen and say, "okay, I have to go to this meeting and talk about, you know, make an agreement about working on this together. Do you guys have any objections to that?"

So the collaborative aspect of decision-making seems to be more of an expectation than an absolute necessity. Toni voiced this particular part of the decision-making process:

We help out wherever we can. So, that's where decision-making is quite, it's very communal. It's like living in a co-op or something. No one really makes the decision and if someone ever does just make a decision and not tell everyone else, it sort of throws them off, I think.

The decision-making process seems to be fairly unstructured, where individuals often have to make their own decisions but are expected to do so with some input from co-workers. Leslie suggested that AS staff "rely on each other for feedback a fair bit".

Decision-making also involves PAS and other community organizations that may be affected by the decisions. When asked about decision-making at AS, all of the staff discussed the importance of consulting with PAS. For example here is what Morgan had to say:

We, you know, actually go out there and find out what people in the community want us to do or how they feel that might affect them and when I say community I mean other agencies but primarily I'm talking about the people that we're serving. I think that that is really unique. I'm sure other places do that to a certain extent, but that goes on around here a heck of a lot. And it's very crucial, it's a very important part of what goes on here.

As mentioned, every staff member emphasized that soliciting feedback from PAS is very important and that every possible effort is made to get feedback from PAS. Morgan elaborated on the importance of consulting with people:

When people feel like, their opinion matters or their voice counts and they have ownership over what's going on, which I think is really positive, especially for folks who access services. Cause I don't know anywhere, any place else where they have that kind of voice. It's very important to them, obviously, for good



reason. The only negative I can really think of is it's really time-consuming and energy-consuming but I think that the payoff is definitely worth it.

Staff indicated that input sometimes came in the form of informal polling or by holding community meetings where they advertise and invite people to attend and give their feedback.

### **4.3 Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture is difficult to capture and can be quite complicated. I identified five themes from the focus group and face-to-face interviews that comprise organizational culture at AS.

#### **4.3.1 AS is Unique**

This theme became apparent during the focus group discussion. All of the participants confirmed this theme before we began the one-on-one interview. This theme is difficult to demonstrate in isolation because it came up in relation to other themes, so it is found throughout the themes but it is characterized by statements like “we do things differently” or “we’re not like other organizations”.

There is a strong sense that AS is a unique organization and a sense that staff is proud of that uniqueness. In part, it seems that a sense of pride in being different stems from the perception that PAS have been mistreated by other organizations. AS wants to distinguish themselves from other organizations that create or enforce barriers for PAS. They want to make it very clear that AS is not like these organizations and not just to PAS but to anyone else trying to understand the organization.

In addition to providing a sense of pride for staff at AS, this theme also demonstrates part of how AS defines their identity as an organization. Their identity seems to be partially defined by the fact that they are not other organizations. So, participants often contrasted what AS does with other organizations and set themselves apart from other organizations with negative differentiation. In other words, often indicating what they are not, rather than what they are.

Whether or not this organization is actually unique is not possible for me to say. It is important to recognize that part of the organizational culture at AS is the feeling that AS sets themselves apart from other organizations and takes a sense of pride in that

differentiation. I will be reporting on themes that emerged from the research data and then perhaps the organization will have a concrete set of themes that they can use to determine how different, or similar, they are to other organizations.

Upon reporting back to the organization, this theme raised some interesting questions for the organization. One participant reflected on the potential impact for the entire organization when their identity is negatively defined. The illumination of this theme generated some discussion and some reflection on how they define themselves as an organization, which they plan to explore in greater detail in the future.

#### **4.3.2 Words Should be put into Action**

A prominent theme that emerged in speaking with staff at AS was that, as much as possible, staff put their words into action. It was important to staff that their actions match their beliefs so that they do not say one thing and do another. Part of the reason that this is so important to the staff seems to be the strength of their personal value systems and beliefs. It would be difficult for staff to feel as though their personal beliefs were being compromised in their work, thus, the importance of forging their belief system with the work that they are doing every day.

Staff were passionate and emphatic about their commitment to backing up their words with actions that matched those words. For example, in describing one of the things that she liked best about AS, Morgan had this to say:

People here, they talk the talk and they walk the walk...When we say that we believe in harm reduction practices, we do and it's not just about giving out condoms or clean needles, but it relates to the way that we do every single thing in this space. And I think that that's really important and meaningful. And when we talk about respect we actually really do mean respect and not just with the staff but also with the people that we work with.

Leslie expressed a very similar sentiment but she articulated it a little differently:

I think the organization, the people in the organization really live out the broad scope of harm reduction. They *live it out* on a day-to-day basis.

In making this statement, Leslie emphasized the words “live it out”, meaning that staff takes the principles of harm reduction seriously. It is not a token gesture on the part of the organization in saying that they believe in harm reduction; they actually try to live

that out in the organization. Staff also expressed their sincerity in seeking input from PAS:

We try really hard to help people understand that their input genuinely informs the decision we make and has an impact. It's not just, okay we asked them, now we can go make the decision we were going to make anyway. (Riley)

Skye was passionate in her explanation of genuine desire for input from PAS:

AIDS Saskatoon I really think is dynamic and responsive to the environment and the community...and I don't just mean that as a, you know, we say that we care, but we actually do listen to what people say when they come in here and use that and actually specifically ask for more of that.

Terry also emphasized the importance of matching words with action in describing input from PAS by stating that in a decision to include a PAS in the entire hiring process from screening applications, to developing interview questions, to conducting the interview was driven by this sentiment: "we're not just going to pay lip service to that".

It was apparent that staff took a sense of pride in this attribute of the organization. Staff felt that by actually taking their mission statement and organizational values to a level beyond words and into daily practice that they have accomplished a desirable feat, and not one that every organization embodies. For example, Riley described her disappointment with other organizations:

What I find is the other organizations I've been in may use words that fit with what I believe and how I've come to understand the work that I do and how I work with people, but often the practice doesn't fit with the words.

AS feels that they actually demonstrated that they were serious about input from PAS and were serious about matching the actions with the beliefs.

The staff believe strongly in trying to put principles into action, every day, in every situation; not just saying that they believe in a certain set of principles but actually examining what those principles are and acting in accordance with their interpretation of those principles:

People can read all they want about our organization and how we approach people and even be, in some ways, told about that, but [it's] more about being able to put a really specific set of beliefs and values into practice in everyday kind of life. And it's not just in specific instances. (Focus group participant)

It would not be possible to work by a set of beliefs unless a person has a strong sense of what it is s/he believes in the first place, or self-awareness; self-awareness includes beliefs, lessons from education, lessons from other life experiences, and a general sense of self-understanding. In addition to that self-awareness, it became apparent that a successful AS employee would possess an ability to apply all of those things that have gone into becoming who s/he is as a person.

Even though values and beliefs are very different among the staff at AS, what was common to all staff was an indication that they understand what those beliefs are and how they look in practice. Riley explained how working at AS was a fit with her beliefs, without having the same beliefs as everyone else:

I found the whole approach to the organization...incredibly grassroots, incredibly respectful of other people and their right to make choices and it really fit well with my own personal beliefs and values and I didn't feel like I had to check who I was at the door. So I could bring in my opinions and my politics and my beliefs...it was a place where people brought that all in but didn't impose it on others.

Toni expressed why it is important for staff at AS to be able to apply their experiences in their work:

Someone...who believes in their own experiences, not in somebody else's. Like they could believe in everything AIDS Saskatoon does, but if they don't have their own to draw on...So, I think people who have reached the point where they can actually take all these amazing life experiences, cuz everyone does have them, and actually know how to make that into something that can become complimentary or can fit into an organization [would be a good fit at AS].

Toni was able to articulate the importance of being able to apply her experiences:

I finally have found something that I can filter all my own knowledge, like my own learned knowledge, into? Everyone here, they allow you to integrate that into your own programming or the whole group's programming. They're very open to that. You know, we have a plethora of different people with all these experiences and there's space to actually integrate that.

Riley highlighted the value that AS puts on diversity among individuals. She indicated how the organization benefits from a diverse group of people with the ability to see how their experiences apply to the organization:

Everyone comes to this place with diverse backgrounds, diverse values, their own expertise, regardless of whether they got a piece of paper to say they're

experts on anything, and that we do have people with different degrees, or parts of degrees, or you know, who've done amazing things in the world that many people might say, well, it's not really relevant to HIV work. You know, like, how is a degree in, [whatever] relevant in an HIV organization.

But for us it's about the experience people gain through exploring those topics and how maybe they can take those lessons and apply them here. And actually celebrating and emphasizing the diversity, rather than saying, well diversity here means we treat everyone the same and that everyone is supposed to feel that they're the same. And that's not, we emphasize much more sort of the differences but not in the sense of I'm different than you are so we don't get along, but that I have a lot to learn from my co-workers and from the people who come to the door and the volunteers who work here and the Board members and, and that everyone's seen as valued and an expert in something.

At AS diversity is important and respected and so are the experiences that have contributed to a person's values and beliefs. However, in addition to valuing diversity, AS believes that in order to contribute meaningfully, a person needs to be able to put those values into practice.

Part of the motivating factor of being able to put words to actions is that staff believe that by working at AS they are making a difference in society as a whole; so for staff working at AS fulfils a moral obligation to contribute positively to the community.

Riley explained that obligation:

I think we all feel we have an obligation to do something about the issues we see in this world and that we are all committed to working for social change and not just oh we're here to help people...we're here to address the issues that make it necessary for people to have to come to AIDS Saskatoon. I think the intent is common, the background and perspective and beliefs may be different, but that we all have this sort of overriding obligation to do something to make the world a better place.

All participants readily acknowledged that their purpose for being at AS reached beyond simply doing a job; they all felt that by working at AS they were serving a greater societal role. In addition to feeling a sense of satisfaction in the work by connecting with individuals, staff also feel that they are influencing greater societal issues. Morgan described how she contributes by working at AS:

Every single thing that we do around here we do it with purpose in the way that we, we look at the world outside of this office and we are able to look at it and figure out what's wrong with it and we have a pretty good idea of why things are the way that they are in terms of poverty, addictions, abuse, residential schools

racism, sexism, homophobia all those kinds of things...and so we don't for example, make soup every second Thursday because people are hungry, simply. We make nutritious soup that is preferably vegetarian and organic for people every second Thursday, because we know that Social Services is screwing them over because our government is shite and we know that these people don't have money for nutritious, especially organic food, because Social Services sucks and because they potentially are spending the money that they receive on other things like drugs and alcohol and we don't judge them for that. We realize that they are using those things in response to the way that they've been treated in this world because of things like...sexism and homophobia and racism...

One of the focus group participants explained how working at AS provided her with some personal satisfaction:

It's like you're not in it just because you get a paycheck at the end of the day. Somehow it's like a really interesting way to stretch your mind and your take on the world...and as a bonus you also get paid for it. And it gives you the freedom to explore stuff about yourself and stuff about people...

Terry referred to work at AS as "a labour of love". Leslie also described how her job at AS made her feel:

It's just really fulfilling. It just feels like you're doing something important, that has meaning.

This theme is illustrative of the palpable conviction and sincerity participants expressed about their reasons for working at AS. It was imperative that the work participants are doing at AS reflects their commitment to PAS in not just words but most importantly through actions.

### **4.3.3 AS Believes in Providing a Safe Space**

Some participants expressed that it was important to provide PAS with a safe space. In t interviews with participants, three different aspects to providing a safe space at AS emerged: being open to everyone, the importance of self-determinism, and being non-judgmental.

One element of the organization that staff expressed a sense of pride in was that the doors of AS are open to everyone, no matter whether or not they have been using any kind of substance, appear to be wearing gang colours, or seem threatening in some other way. The only restriction placed on PAS, as Terry explained is "don't be violent, don't be an asshole". Toni explained that AS works this way:

We open our doors to everyone...So, if someone comes in wearing their gang colors and is in a big group, we don't turn our backs to them. We might be a little bit more cautious but we're open to everyone and people know that. You know, people come in all states of sobriety, not even sobriety (laughter) I shouldn't even say that, but in all different states whether they are using substances or whatever and we still treat them the same way... We deal with some pretty scary people sometimes and even the scariest ones, or whatever substance they're on, you still say, hey, how's it going?

Staff emphasized that in many other organizations, people will not be allowed to access services unless they are substance-free. Leslie put it this way:

I mean, one of the biggest things that makes us different from other places is we don't care if people have been using or drinking when they're in here, as long as they're behaving in a way that's you know acceptable to everybody here. And that's really, really unusual.

Staff were very clear on the importance of this aspect of their organization. No one felt it was their place to restrict people from accessing the organization because they were using any kind of substance. Behaviour is the factor that staff emphasized as important, rather than substance use, appearance, or hygiene. So as long as the behaviour is acceptable, (eg. non-violent and non-abusive), things like substance use and appearance do not affect access to services. Morgan expressed the distinction this way:

We're really the only place in town where people can go if they're, you know, intoxicated or high or whatever...there are folks that I've come to love dearly who will say, yeah [Morgan], I got kicked from whatever for the fourth time, and I'm like, but why? Why? It doesn't make any sense to me. So we tend not to have a lot of rules around that kind of stuff.

For staff, the mitigating factor is behaviour, not the substance use. Staff do not see validity in withholding services from people based solely on their substance use. They do see validity in observing behaviour and taking caution based on those observations.

The open door understanding also reflects the way the organization operates on a daily basis. Most often, if someone is in the office, his/her door will be open and PAS have access to any staff. There is no check-in at a front desk or a protocol for who can speak with whom at what point in time. So upon first entry into the building, no one is there to monitor or otherwise direct people's movements; it is completely up to the person first entering the organization to figure out where they want or need to go. However, if someone is standing around looking a bit lost, eventually a staff member

will ask if the person needs something, as happened with me when I first entered the organization. Toni described their office protocol this way:

It's more of an open door, closed door sort of thing. There's lots of offices I've worked in that would, you know, stop the people that work, we work with, at the door and say, yeah, I don't think you're coming in here, you know? So we're more of an open door.

For the most part, it is up to PAS to determine what makes them most comfortable or what needs they have. So, even though there is a designated counselor on staff, PAS can, and do, speak with whomever they choose to for whatever reason. Some PAS have developed a relationship with staff other than the counselor where they prefer to discuss personal issues. Of course, if someone comes in to request a counselor, the designated counselor will be the one to meet with people. The reasoning for this approach was addressed at the focus group:

We made a commitment to operate in the least intrusive way we can and to be respectful of the fact that people can decide what they want to tell us, when they want to tell us, how they want us to know, who wants to know, whether it's, you know, they choose to tell [this person] or they want to tell [that person] or whoever, and so that sort of heightens the importance of that sort of subtext of understanding the non-verbal current of what goes on around here.

Another key point that this participant made was how the open door approach requires some skills of perception. For example, as I mentioned earlier, when I first entered the organization, somebody asked me if there was something they could help me with. That person had to make a judgment call, based on my body language, whether or not I was looking for someone to help me. Somebody else that entered the organization and gave off different body language or behaved differently probably would not have been asked the same, if any questions. So, staff are constantly making calls as to what it is that people need. Here is how Leslie explained initial interactions with PAS:

I mean, and a large part of that's their body language and their non-verbal cues and stuff yeah, so it really depends on them. And, which is the whole basis of how we work, right? Like, what do they want or need?...It just really varies and it varies on what the person wants and what they're giving off.

Often, staff used the phrase "meeting people where they are at" to express self-determinism. Originally when I heard this phrase I took it to mean that everyone was welcome in the organization, regardless of where they are in life, and staff will offer



them assistance for whatever they need. However, it is important that in addition to that, meeting people where they are at means that any kind of contact or assistance is also up to PAS, which may mean that they do not actually want anything other than a cup of coffee. Regardless of what help, services, or assistance staff *might* be able to offer, it is up to PAS to determine the contact. Staff do not assume that because someone comes in to the office, no matter what they look like or what problems they appear to have, that they necessarily need “help” or anything else from the staff or organization.

Self-determinism is an essential part of providing a safe-space because ultimately AS believes that people are robbed of their independence if people are pushed in any way towards behaviour that staff or society deems appropriate or acceptable. Once stripped of independence people are also stripped of accountability and dignity; treated as people who are simply incapable of making their own choices.

The non-judgmental aspect of this theme is quite complicated because staff were very clear that what they mean by judgmental and what others mean by judgmental are very different. Therefore, I will attempt to describe the meaning of non-judgmental, in practice at AS, as I have come to understand it. Part of being non-judgmental applies to acceptance that there is a diverse range of people in the world and ensuring that they all feel welcome at AS:

There’s a lot of places in the world...or...just in Saskatoon, where maybe people feel like they can’t go because maybe they are the wrong gender or the wrong color or the wrong sexuality...And everybody knows that they can come here and that’s okay and that it doesn’t matter what their experiences are. (Morgan)

As Morgan explains, there are many places where some people given their race, gender, or sexuality, may not feel comfortable or safe. However, at AS staff have tried to make an environment where everyone who enters will feel as though they are welcome.

Another aspect to being non-judgmental, in AS’ view, is recognizing that different people make different choices, and they are entitled to make those choices, regardless of what staff, or society, thinks is the right, best, or most appropriate choice. Riley explained it this way:

Is it difficult for me to be non-judgmental with this person when I’m going, what are you doing? (laughter) Every bone in my body is saying you’re going to screw up. But to be able to step back and know you have the support of your co-workers in saying, maybe I believe with every fibre of my being that you’re

making the wrong choice but it's your choice to make and I need to just step out of this. Or you know, just say I've given you the information I have on that and you make the choice.

And Leslie quite succinctly explained:

If you want everyone to live their life just like you, you're in big trouble. You wouldn't fit here at all.

Riley elaborated to emphasize that good intention cannot supersede judgment:

Judgment is such a subtle thing and people may think that good intent can sort of override judgment and that, well, I meant well, therefore I'm non-judgmental. ...non-judgmental is an experience, it's not always an overt thing. Like if people feel judged, then the service is judgmental. I mean, if they feel like somebody is telling them, well, if you just do things differently, you wouldn't be in this situation.

Therefore, part of understanding non-judgment at AS is to accept that sometimes people make choices with which staff do not agree and that it is not up to staff to persuade, coerce, or even suggest that those choices are wrong. The rationale is that part of being non-judgmental is recognizing not only the diversity of people but also the diversity of choice. Terry expressed how it can be patronizing to suggest that people cannot make their own choices:

They're an adult, they understand the choices they make every day. They're not stupid people.

Being non-judgmental is also about realizing that people are entitled and capable of making their own choices; to assume otherwise is viewed as insulting to PAS.

Several staff indicated that recognizing privilege in their own lives is essential to work at AS. Although not directly articulated by staff I believe that part of the importance of recognizing privilege is related to the way staff perceive judgment. If a person holds the belief that things she has in her life are a result of achievement and not privilege, then she also holds the belief that other people have just as much possibility of having the same things in their lives, if only they had made different choices.

One of the clearest ways that staff expressed their approach to being non-judgmental was with reference to services. Leslie:

Word gets around very quickly on the street that here's a place where you can go and it's okay to be there They won't kick you out. Here's a place where you can

go use the phone, here's a place where you can go do your laundry. Here's a place you can go where people don't look down on you...we've gotten that feedback from a lot of people.

So it is not just about delivering a service like providing a newspaper for people to read but it's about delivering that service in a way that does not make anyone feel any less of a person that is deserving of dignity and respect.

The effect of the non-judgmental approach was recognized in particular with reference to the laundry service and needle distribution<sup>1</sup>. Part of the reason the laundry access is so successful is because staff are not judging people who come in to use the washer and dryer. People are not being condescended to or looked at with any sense of pity. It is simply viewed as a basic need that some people do not have access to:

The washer and dryer was...a big symbol in this agency because, number one, it symbolizes what we're about, those small things that can make such a big difference in somebody's life, and it also was the, I think, the catalyst that really opened our doors to the huge groups of people that come through here nowadays. (Leslie)

The laundry service is about meeting a basic need for people but it is also about doing it in a way that respects that these services are privileges that many of us take for granted.

One participant indicated that they approach needle distribution in a different way than other organizations. AS does not ask for any information when distributing needles so that people will hopefully feel more comfortable getting needles. Morgan described the needle distribution program this way:

Names, health card numbers, phone numbers, addresses...we don't buy into that crap. We're like no questions asked. You need a needle, fine have a needle. You don't need to bring us a used needle in exchange. You can just take your needles and go...it's none of my darn business who these people are. I don't need to know. I mean, I think it's just a courtesy and respect to begin with and then also, because if people are being asked to give up identifying information, then that introduces, I imagine, probably some kind of fear in their lives, and they don't want the world, you know, whoever that is keeping track of it, they don't want them to know that they're coming and getting these needles. So people are going to choose to not go and get their clean needles when they probably should be getting them...it's just unnecessary and it's intrusive and it's disrespectful and it's just one more barrier to people accessing the things that they need. (Morgan)

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<sup>1</sup> Needle distribution is no longer available at AS due to funding constraints but has been available in the past.

Staff then recognize that simply offering a service is not enough. It has to be delivered in a way that maximizes its use, and in the case of needle distribution that means making the experience as unobtrusive and easy as possible. This approach characterizes the way many of the services were described, as a way to meet people's needs but to also do so in a way that respects them as human beings with pride and dignity.

If staff are to, as much as possible, take the approach of respecting people as human beings in order to achieve a non-judgmental atmosphere, they must be able to look beyond appearances and social categorizations. Two staff members were clear about how they relate to other people:

It's very easy for me to just relate to people as people rather than, you are aboriginal or you are an IV drug user, or you are whatever. Know what I mean? It's just, I'm Morgan, you're whatever your name is and let's talk, and I'll get you some coffee and, you know, that kind of thing? (Morgan)

It's just like, different people are neat, they're not scary because they don't live next door to you and go to the same school as you and eat the same food you do. (Skye)

It takes a certain kind of skill to be able to approach each person with the notion that they are individuals and look past appearance, life experience, and personal judgments about their choices. Staff expressed that they are not always successful but that they certainly try.

This theme was crucial for putting into words some of those taken for granted phrases, such as safe space, meeting people where they are at, non-judgmental, and self-determinism and exploring their meaning in the context of AS. Some of these phrases could seem self-explanatory at first glance; however, it became clear that participants' perceptions of these terms were very different than how others may perceive them.

#### **4.3.4 Building Relationships**

The importance of building relationships comes from sentiments of recognizing that everyone is a human being first as well as an understanding of the powerful effects of personal connections made between people. Staff also placed emphasis on relationships as a mechanism to try and diminish some of the hierarchy between PAS and staff.

Staff at AS put emphasis on the importance of making connections with PAS, other staff, volunteers, and contract staff. However, staff indicated that some of these attempts at building relationships are more successful than others. From the interviews, it seems as though staff have been more successful at building relationships with PAS than with some volunteers and contract staff.

Staff were all clear about the importance they placed on the work that they do in terms of relationship-building. The first principle of that work is that everyone who comes in to AS is a human being. Riley explained:

We acknowledge that everyone who is in this space, whether they're paid to be here, whether they're volunteering, whether they're accessing a service is a human being first...it's about relationships between human beings not about professionals and clients or, well I'm here to deliver a service. It's about, I'm here to create relationships with people as a means of addressing social issues and supporting people as they try to navigate through the world.

Another participant also discussed how important it is to treat people as human beings first:

You come in, you are a volunteer, you are staff, you are infected, you just got a rig, it doesn't matter. You are treated with the same respect and dignity and care as the next person. It's not fake...it's habit and it's natural. (Terry)

In addition to treating people with equal respect, staff at AS took pride in the fact that people who are new to the organization would not be able to distinguish between staff and PAS.

The importance of building relationships was seen as in opposition to a service-delivery model where there are clients one side and staff on another. A focus group participant explained it this way:

I think it goes back to...everybody working cooperatively, that Saskatchewan spirit. Because when you talk about that here, we're not just talking about a staff working that way, we all work together and I think the people who come in here, and I think they get a good sense of that. That we're all in it together. It's not just staff and people who access services. The folks who come here day after day after day feel that this is their place and it's not that we're here to help them, that we're all in this together and what can we do?

Terry expressed something similar when she described her view of the work she does at AS:

It's an honour to meet you. Thank you for sharing your story. Building relationships...and that's all helping really is, saying hello I'm here...It's never me helping them, it's always us helping each other. We share stories about our lives.

She was quite adamant that relationships were the most important part of the work at AS and that those relationships were important to her, she did not see those relationships as only valuable for PAS.

This division between staff and PAS was clearly a pivotal issue and one that is essential to grasp if one is to understand AS. Another participant at the focus group described the contrasting service-delivery model to the AS mode of relationship-building:

We don't work on sort of the traditional charitable model where we're here to give of our wonderful gifts and skills and provide those to the lowly people who need us in order to survive...we are a piece of the puzzle that creates a space for people to figure out what their needs are and to figure out how to get those needs met...my background as a social worker is like, when you come in, you assess people, you make a plan and how you're going to intervene. Like, it's very action oriented and it's very I need to do something to help you as opposed to us working in a space where it's seen as more collaborative. So I'm not serving someone...it's not a one-way thing.

Therefore, at AS staff do not view what they do as service but as building relationships with people that fosters trust and in turn a capability for PAS to themselves determine their needs. The notion that staff are there to offer a service is rejected because staff feel it is important to connect with people on a level of humanity rather than at a level that would distinguish staff as providers and PAS as clients. Leslie could see the long-term importance of making a connection with people, at the same time as she expressed others' inability to see the value in building a personal relationship:

[Some people] don't see the value in being in a community kitchen and cooking with other people and they don't...they don't get that sense of how much you can connect with people over preparing food together, or how that makes it much easier for people to connect with you and, though they may not come out with great dramatic things while you're cooking food together, in two days, when they really need to talk to somebody about something, you have that connection made because you've shared that experience with them. So, some people don't see, sort of, the value in that kind of stuff, but to me, those kinds of things are really, really important.

Even though immediate effects of making a personal connection with another individual are not always apparent, in the approach that AS takes, the long-term potential is worth the effort. The idea is that when a connection is made, PAS might feel more comfortable asking questions or coming to staff members with concerns.

In this pursuit of building relationships, AS has taken a specific approach to how they view themselves and PAS. Skye passionately explained her perception of PAS:

The people who come in here, they're not clients accessing a service. They're people. They are you. They could be you, quite easily, if you were born somewhere else, different time, different family.

Staff at AS did not differentiate themselves from PAS; they see themselves on the same level as the PAS, which means that there is no such thing as "professional distance". At the focus group, one participant articulated it this way:

I think it's a willingness to not see yourself as separate from the people who come here. Which, I think a lot of people are taught, is really, really bad, especially if you're training in like nursing and social work, that you need to have this professional distance, from the people who you're going to work with, or who you're going to *serve*...It's that you're there to do something *to* people or *for* people and that you have to maintain your distance.

Terry also expressed her distain for a view of professional-client relationship:

I always felt that at other agencies we were seen separate from 'clients'. And God I hate that word. It's a terrible word. If somebody wants to stand beside you and tell you their story, that's an honour to you, it's not the other way around. That's what I learned.

Staff at AS understand that people are unique in their specific circumstances, the way they deal with those circumstances, and what, if anything, they want to do about their circumstances. So, they are quick to acknowledge that, while they do have some knowledge, they cannot and do not know everything about each individual but are willing to do what they can. Skye explained it like this:

I don't perceive us anyway, as being some kind of experts who sit here and say, "yeah we know everything"...we're not here to be a place where you can come for all answers but more like, a safe place where you're free to ask questions. You know, you're not maybe gonna get the right answer all the time but we're a place where you can come in and ask and we don't know everything and we're not scared to say that we don't know everything but we'll help you find whatever answer is right for you.

Professional distance sets up a hierarchical relationship between people that AS works hard to minimize. Participants still recognize that there is a hierarchical difference and always will be, given that they get paid to be there, but that they will try not to amplify that hierarchy and will not pretend that one does not exist:

It's, I mean, there is still distance, and there's no doubt about it and there's still differences in terms of, ultimately I do have more power. I mean, I'm paid to be here. And I have a lot more privilege in my life and I can make decisions that affect people and I can say no I'm sorry we can't be that for you. So I do, I mean, people who are on staff have power. But I think we're very open about that and we don't try to pretend that we're entitled to that and we won't question it and that we don't name it that, and just say, I'm professional. As a way of disguising the fact that, yeah, I do have more power than you do in this situation and that sucks. And I'm gonna do what I can to use that power very responsibly and, you know, not to say, well I can make decisions, and use it in a threatening way or a coercive way. (Riley)

Riley also suggested that in her experience at other organizations, it was unacceptable to cross a professional boundary:

A lot of places that I've worked...I have to check my personal life at the door because there's a very clear sense that it is not appropriate for the people who are accessing a service to know anything about me as a human being or to understand my own background as a human being. And that that's seen as crossing a line and being either unprofessional or not having very good boundaries with people. And here we've sort of interpreted, I mean, number one, we don't want to be professionals. It's not about, I'm a professional.

The approach that AS takes, where they value relationships and make concerted efforts to build relationships with people around them means that they are making themselves emotionally vulnerable. Terry put it this way:

Staff at AS, they lay themselves on the line every day; they are putting themselves out there all day every day.

Because staff are trying to build genuine relationships with people, they need to make themselves emotionally available, which leaves them open to being hurt. Riley described some of the difficulty with the kind of work they do at AS:

How do we deal with the grief and loss of doing this work every day? And that's not just by death and people dying, but by seeing people who, no matter what we do, their life still sucks, and some days that really hurts, that we all come here with these wonderful intentions and goals and some days we just don't see any



results from that and sometimes we go for months without seeing concrete things that make us say we're doing this right and this is good work.

And Toni also expressed how being emotionally vulnerable sometimes looks in practice and how difficult it can be to manage but how it can sometimes pay off:

Even if they were completely rude to me the day before or I don't feel comfortable around them, I still talk with them. Sometimes you don't get responses but, you hope that a little bit, something you did might have made them a little bit comfortable and who knows.

In other words, Toni is willing to take the chance that she will be rejected or insulted for the possibility that her continued attempts to make a connection will result in some form of relationship, regardless of how she may personally be hurt from those attempts.

There are also benefits from the relationships that develop. Morgan described how she feels about some of the bonds that she has formed with PAS:

What makes it enjoyable is, when somebody comes in here and gets angry because someone punched a wall near the bathroom and says, you guys treat us so well, you guys do so much for us, how could anybody treat you like that? That makes me feel good because then I am like, yeah, we're kind of making a difference to somebody and no, we didn't, no maybe, change their lives radically for them, but somebody knows that I actually genuinely give a shit...

Morgan further emphasized the power of those bonds with some of the loyalty she has experienced:

I know that if someone comes in and is disrespectful to me, that a staff member or a regular, is going to stick up for me. And people also know that if they come in here and someone is disrespectful to them, that I'm gonna stand up for them. So there's a lot of like mutual respect that goes on there too.

One of the benefits of making relationships with people is a mutual respect and loyalty.

Leslie also described how deep the loyalty goes:

I mean, if you think bonds between the staff are strong, the bonds with some of the folks who come in here are, oh, very powerful... You get to know them really well. And they we, we're just incredibly blessed. I mean, if when there are somewhat dangerous situations, which happens here, they're very protective of us and they, a lot of the times, they'll take matters, they'll deal with situations that are somewhat dangerous. They also have a lot more skill in doing that because they're used to doing that, when they're street-involved. They've spent a lot of time dealing with difficult situations.

Many of the PAS, having been going to AS for a number of years, have developed a deep sense of loyalty to the staff and the organization so that they take what measures they can to ensure the staff's safety. Leslie also indicated that some of the PAS have come to view staff at AS as much more than just staff:

Yeah, they're very protective of us...And they tell us we're family...And it is because we accept them for who they are. They know that we care about them. They know that we're not gonna be lecturing them, sermonizing, telling them what they have to do. If we can help them in some way, they know we will.

These bonds are strong and highly valued in AS' perception. They have been developed with genuine intent to form relationships with other people and this intent forms the basis of the work that AS is doing.

Staff discussed the struggle to maintain boundaries with PAS. Because AS places so much emphasis on building relationships, it is natural that issues arise. Staff were struggling with the lines that have to be drawn when, even though they are trying to build relationships with people, they recognize that some boundaries have to be in place. One of the focus group participants tried to distinguish professional distance from healthy boundaries:

I think there's a difference between having a professional distance because you're the professional helper and they're the person receiving help that creates that sort of imbalance of power or amplifies it, or emphasizes it. I think there's a difference between that and having healthy boundaries and say, well, I'm not going to tell people, well I live here and if you want to stop by for coffee later go ahead.

Another focus group participant elaborated to explain that establishing boundaries is also part of self-awareness:

And a good sense of, a stable sense of self, I also have the strength to say no, that isn't my job, and I won't push that boundary that far.

In her interview, Skye also touched on how important self-awareness is in having the confidence to establish clear boundaries for employees at AS:

They might not really know who they are but they are aware of, there are certain things that work for them, they have certain boundaries, they are not afraid to say yeah I don't know who I am but this is how I feel, or this is how I am today.

One of the other struggles that staff indicated that they encounter was to prevent work from affecting their personal lives too heavily. For example, Morgan described the result of having close bonds with PAS:

We tend sometimes to blur the lines a little bit in terms of interpersonal relationships. Which I think is okay cause, at the end of the day, we're all people you know. It's not that I'm staff and somebody is a person who accesses services. We're all people. And so we do develop those bonds and sometimes it can get a bit dicey because the people who come in here generally live in chaos, to a certain extent, and the staff, I think, sometimes ends up almost mimicking the chaos. You know, the way that we work is very chaotic and because of the work that we do, I think it's easy for us to let that affect our personal lives, and so that our lives outside of the office can become very chaotic. But we all try to talk a lot.

Relationship-building also applies to co-workers at AS and staff all acknowledged that they had personal relationships with co-workers and that those relationships were highly valued. Morgan described her view of relationship development at AS:

I very much value the relationships that I have with my colleagues here...there has to be some amount of friendship. Most definitely. And, I mean, there's, with very few exceptions I think, would there ever not be friendship. Whether somebody's only working here for six months or whatever, I mean, those ties just naturally develop. It's just to what extent.

Riley was quite emphatic about the importance of her work relationships:

I think it would feel awful to feel like I come here and no one knows who I really am and no, you know, no one wants to know what I did on the weekend...I think having some sort of personal connection with your co-workers is a necessity, on a social level.

Leslie was very clear about the importance of her relationships with co-workers:

The staff is very, very close-knit and I get enormous support from the other staff members and they're another important reason why I stay here. If they weren't the people they are and doing work in the way they work, I wouldn't have stayed.

However, it would seem from the interviews that relationship building has been less successful among staff, particularly with contract staff and volunteers, than it has been with PAS. Toni reflected upon the lack of knowledge about a contract employee:

It's amazing that, did we need to take the extra time to find out about her? Did we need to ask her those questions? I don't know, somehow we can transfer all of that to people who come in here but there's a problem with new staff.

Morgan described one possible reason for the difference:

I think the staff just doesn't really want to do the work to reach out. Well, I mean, it takes up a lot of emotional energy right, to get to know someone, form a connection with them and then let them go, especially if they're only around for four months or whatever. I mean it's a lot of emotional work.

There was also some reflection on the fact that boundaries can sometimes be difficult among staff as well as between staff and PAS. Because friendships and relationships have developed or existed before being colleagues, there has been some feedback from new employees to the organization that they did not feel part of the group. Part of the alienation that new employees feel can be attributed to a normal process of adjusting to a new setting and a new group. However, staff did indicate that they are very close and sometimes people have felt excluded because of the closeness among staff.

#### **4.3.5 Critical Reflection**

Another element of organizational culture that emerged from the interviews is that of critical reflection. Participants discussed the importance of critical reflection within the organization but also discussed the importance for individuals to be able to engage in that reflection and to learn from the thought process. A focus group participant described how this learning process could work:

There have been people who you interview them and you're like, oh my dear God, cuz you'll ask them something like, what is your experience working with marginalized people, right? And...this person doesn't understand what this question even means...can you tell me what a marginalized person is?...you get people asking you that. But we've hired some people like that they've actually been pretty cool...only because they came here not understanding what marginalization means, or that there are people who are a different socio-economic background than them in this world. But they came here, saw, like oh look this person wandered in and they didn't sleep at home last night because they slept in the park somewhere and I'm learning about that and I can use that information to educate me about the world I live in.

What this participant is expressing is the importance in constant reflection and what information a person takes away from that reflection. In other words, it is not always

about what knowledge a person comes to the organization with but what that person is willing to learn. Another focus group participant provided another example:

It's neat though 'cause people all have their own morals and things like that...I dealt with that yesterday. Well people they didn't agree with harm reduction so, lots of people who might come in here to work for us would say no, I don't agree that we should hand out rigs and things like that but then they could still fit in real well, and you know, they have completely different morals, but when they start working see okay, then they start to understand it and if they're open enough to understanding it then they can see it with a new lens.

While she recognizes that some people may have different moral standards, she thinks it is important that those people also have the ability to look at the effects of taking a harm reduction approach and be able to alter an opinion based on new information.

Riley identified another reason for the need for constant reflection:

We're always realizing that we thought we'd found the perfect term that doesn't have judgment or that isn't patronizing or isn't perpetuating some sort of oppression and then we realize, you know what? There are subtle pieces of that that do those things and there's a better way to say it or there's a better way to do this work and we're always open to reflecting on that and actually building on that, which keeps this place new.

And although Leslie expressed it differently, she was clear that one of the best things about working at AS was the constant growth she gets from learning on a daily basis:

I've learned so much and I think that's one of the things here is you never stop learning, like, every day, practically, you learn something new. And what I know now is really different than what I knew [a long time ago]...We all learn, all the time, on the job. So you need to be open to learning.

Being open to learning is not necessarily as straightforward as it sounds. As Leslie indicated, it is a choice for her to learn about people leading vastly different lives from hers. "I could easily not ever look at that part of Saskatoon. I mean, many people don't". Many of the PAS have had tragedies in their lives or are currently living in circles of poverty, addictions, and sex trades. To learn about that existence in her own city and to see the reality of those experiences for people on a daily basis takes courage and a willingness to see the reality for many people living in poverty.

Another element to being open to learning is the feeling that you have something to learn. One of the focus group participants reflected on previous staff members that have not worked out at AS:

People who come in with a sense of entitlement based on, well I've worked at this place, this place and this place. Therefore, I'm more than qualified to work for you. Or, I have these many letters behind my name, therefore, I have all the skills I will ever need to do this work. Tend to come in not opened to being challenged because they come in with that sense of entitlement and that sense of "I'm qualified" so that's covered. I can come and share the wealth of skills and knowledge I have with everyone else, and not seeing it as this is a place that is very much based on mutual learning and mutual sharing of knowledge and actually being able to recognize that knowledge isn't just about what grade you finished in school, what your marks were, and how many books you've read. That it comes in all different forms.

What Riley seems to be expressing here is that some people come to AS with the presumption that they will impact the organization and PAS but that they have nothing to learn in return.

Critical reflection is seen as important at AS to keep the organization from growing stagnant and to ensure that AS is offering the best services in the best way possible. Participants identified not just the capacity but also the desire to learn as pivotal in their conception of critical reflection.

#### ***4.4 Theme Summary***

Analysis was organized around three organizational processes: Communication, Decision-Making, and Organizational Culture. These themes represent tacit knowledge at AS; this knowledge has not before been written down in any comprehensive format. The analysis revealed some interesting dynamics in communication and decision-making. The most important form of communication, as identified by the participants, is the non-verbal communication that occurs on a daily basis. Decision-making was very much dual in nature, with collaboration being very important but also having the ability and confidence to make some decisions independently. Five themes emerged around organizational culture: AS is unique, Words should be put into action, AS believes in providing a safe space, Building relationships, and Critical reflection.

## 5 DISCUSSION

A review of Nonaka's work (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et. al., 1996; Nonaka et. al., 2001; Nonaka & Toyama, 2002; Nonaka & Toyama 2003) yielded some important concepts for this study. Initially, the externalization component of the SECI model (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et. al., 1996; Nonaka et. al., 2001; Nonaka & Toyama, 2002; Nonaka & Toyama 2003) was a useful way to frame and understand the research question and now, as I will describe in this section, is a way to convey tacit knowledge explicitly through metaphor. Nonaka (1991) also provided a definition of tacit knowledge that matched what AIDS Saskatoon (AS) staff have already expressed as part of the current state at the organization. The concept of *ba* (Nonaka et. al., 2001; Nonaka & Toyama, 2002; Nonaka & Toyama 2003) provided a way to understand how I could uncover the tacit knowledge in AS. The interview process was in a sense *ba* in Nonaka's model. It was an interactive process where AS staff had to try and explain their tacit knowledge in such a way that I could understand and relay it back to them in a form that accurately represents AS' practice. We created shared space through the interview process and feedback sessions.

Nonaka (1994) sees tacit and explicit knowledge as complementary rather than as a dichotomy. This distinction is important for AS because they still value their tacit knowledge, so much so that they recognize the importance of documenting it. Tacit knowledge is not more important than explicit knowledge or vice versa. They are equally important and having a well-developed capacity to generate and manage both forms of knowledge is pivotal in maximizing knowledge within an organization. AS staff recognized and acknowledged that they are more competent in relation to their tacit knowledge but that their lack of explicit knowledge was causing some challenges for the organization.

What this work highlights is the importance and the power of shared beliefs and mental models; that tacit knowledge that becomes so ingrained in an organization to the

point where spoken communication is no longer necessary and many things are simply understood among staff. However, it also addresses the necessity of taking some of that tacit knowledge and representing it explicitly. AS certainly ran into some difficulty when staff changes occurred, when they needed to apply for funding, or when they needed to explain what it is that they do to others. These difficulties can all be seen as an eventual sustainability problem for the organization. If the organization is to continue and survive then they need to be able to explain and justify what they do.

AS also experienced an important point that Nonaka (1994) makes, which is that it is possible to become stalled in one mode of knowledge production. AS was stalled in tacit knowledge production and this limited them in their ability to convey the importance of the organization to others because the only way to experience AS was by doing what staff at AS do every day, which is obviously not feasible.

It is important to remember that this research is not meant to replace tacit knowledge in the organization. It was a way of providing the organization with a mechanism to explicitly represent what they do tacitly. Nonaka (1994) does not suggest that tacit or explicit knowledge should take precedence over the other. Therefore, this research seeks to demonstrate how the two forms of knowledge work with one another not in competition with one another. There is no intent for AS to replace their tacit knowledge with explicit knowledge, just to enhance overall knowledge creation in the organization by maximizing the production of both forms of knowledge.

Engaging with AS staff in interviews allowed me to organize the results into themes that represent tacit knowledge at the organization. Anyone should be able to grasp the main components of what AS does and why. However, this kind of explicit representation cannot replace tacit knowledge; it becomes an addition to the store of knowledge already at AS. In order to demonstrate how this tacit knowledge fits within the organization, I created an organizational model of AS.

In keeping with my original objective of trying to represent AS' tacit knowledge in explicit form, I have taken Nonaka's (1994) idea of metaphor use to create explicit knowledge from tacit knowledge quite literally. Nonaka (1994) identifies metaphor use as a way to "generate knowledge about the future by using existing knowledge" (p. 21). In other words, the use of metaphor can facilitate the creation of new, explicit



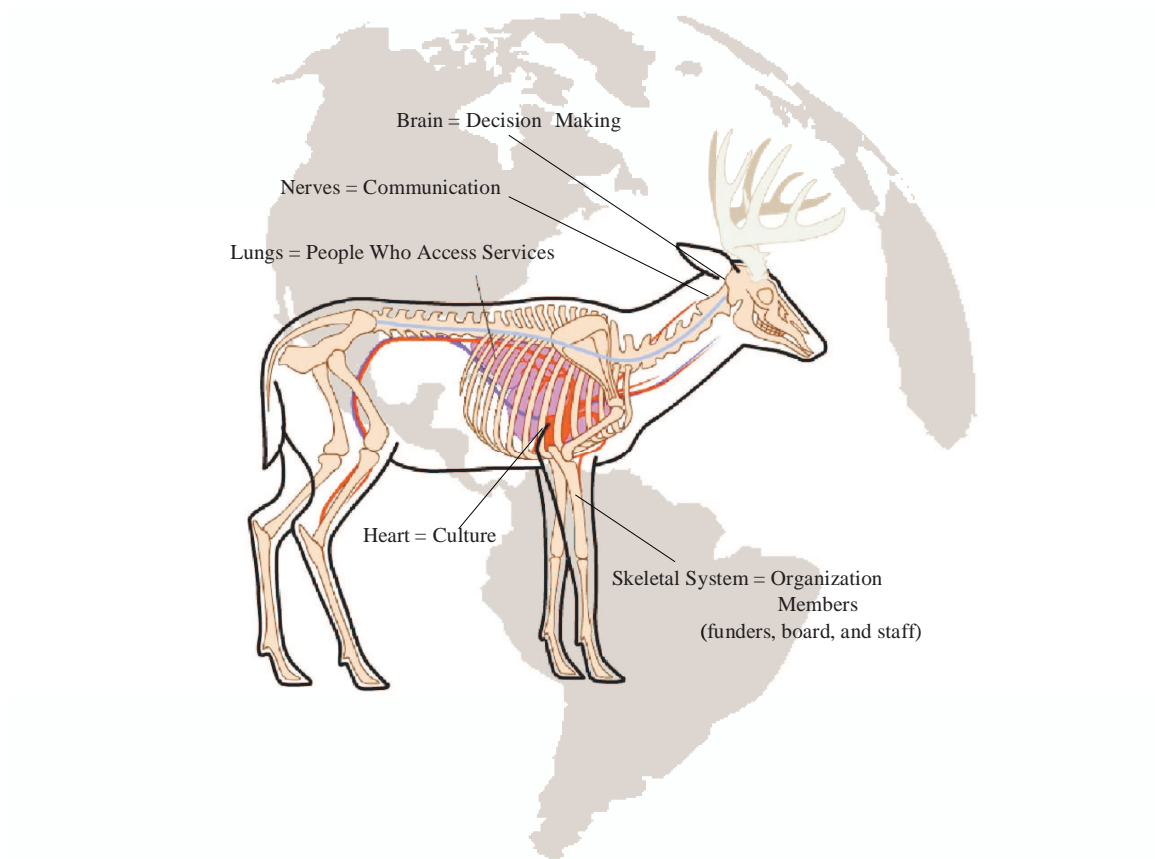


Figure 1: Organizational Model of AIDS Saskatoon

knowledge from already existing tacit knowledge. I have taken the key processes of AS, decision-making, communication, and organizational culture, along with organization members, and represented them in a metaphorical organizational model (Fig. 1). The idea behind the model is that by metaphorically representing how the organization functions, the knowledge about how they do things becomes explicit rather than tacit and can be shared, evaluated, and further developed.

The model is a deer, a living thing, which represents the organization itself; all the parts function as a whole just as a living organism functions as a unified being. The model, as a living organism, is responsive to its context, both past and present. Context is also multi-faceted, occurring at micro and macro levels. The living organism also represents the way the organization learns, as an active, context-sensitive being, without the assumption that the process is linear. The organization is like a living organism, affected, responsive and adaptive to surrounding contexts. In other words, the

organization itself learns like a living organism, or, put in Nonaka's (1994) terms, the organization creates knowledge as well as learns.

Another part of the model is the appearance of "gaia" or the earth behind the organizational model. This relationship is meant to symbolize the place of the organization. AS does not exist in isolation but is part of a larger community that it impacts and is impacted by. This kind of metaphorical representation is referred to as "systems thinking", which is part of the larger discipline of quantum physics.

Representing an organization as a living animal is theoretically congruent with systems theory, where a system is nonlinear, dynamic, and often unpredictable (Gellmann, 1994, Holland, 1995, Dooley, 1997). Systems theory is fitting because it represents much of what AS values; they value being responsive, flexible, and complex. The organization does not want to be limited by being represented as a rigid and unchanging and in fact often refer to their organization as "organic" and dynamic", which mirrors the way that Nonaka (1991; 1994) refers to organizations.

Nonaka (1994) differentiates his thought by refuting a linear view of organizations. Organizations are not information-processing machines but are active knowledge creators. This view held true for AS where the organization values the learning process by which the learners are active participants not just passive recipients of outside knowledge. Instead, AS staff use information to alter their perceptions or behaviours based on new information and create their own knowledge by judging what works and what does not for their organization.

One of the principles of systems thinking is that order is emergent, rather than predetermined (Dooley, 1997). Emergent order is one of the purposes to representing the model as a living animal; the organization, like an animal, is not static but is responsive to its surrounding environment. Therefore, this organizational model is not necessarily a final product. AS will be using the model as they see fit so it may evolve over time. While we may agree that this model accurately represents AS now, it may not do so in the future but still might provide a tool for evolving knowledge.

Chapman (2002) identifies another reason to look at an organization as a living animal, which is common in systems theory. The model is holistic and therefore provides an overarching view, rather than a piece-by-piece examination of parts. A

model as a complex adaptive system, in this case represented by an animal, has the potential to illuminate the interconnectedness between elements and to highlight those processes that can often be lost in attempting to make tacit knowledge explicit.

The brain represents decision-making, the nerves represent communication, the heart represents culture, the lungs represent PAS, and the skeletal structure represents staff, volunteers, and board members. Each part of the model reflects the role that each of the processes play in the organization, not as separate entities but as interconnected and dependent on one another.

This organizational model has been presented to AS with some mixed reaction. Everyone likes the idea of the organization as a living thing but not everyone appreciates the visual representation that I have chosen. I will include the visual in this thesis because I have presented it in the past as a poster and have received feedback that indicated that the visual creates a strong and lasting impact. However, AS may choose a different visual representation at some time in the future. According to Nonaka (1994), the fact that not everyone at AS likes the visual representation is a positive development. It is from this disagreement and discussion about the most appropriate metaphor, that new knowledge is created. This model is not meant to be a solution or an answer but an idea or starting point for AS to generate discussion about how the metaphor fits, and how it does not, and through this process discover more about the organization. The discussion will ideally generate shared understanding and meaning of AS.

The use of metaphor is powerful because the conceptual image and association is different than in reading a chart. The mind has to make some creative links that it would not have to do with a more straightforward representation; hence, the image captures more meaning than a chart can. A unique organizational model is important for AS. They feel that what they do and the way that they approach their work is unique so a uni-dimensional representation of their organization would not capture enough of the essence of the organization. The complexity that can be achieved by using a metaphor is far greater than that of a chart. My representation here of AS as an animal is a way of explicitly representing the organization's, thus far, tacit understanding of their organization as well as a product for AS to use in the future to generate better understanding of the organization.

The research question was concerned with the externalization mode of Nonaka's SECI model. The research has taken AS' tacit knowledge and represented it in an explicit format with the combination of the themes and the organizational model. AS now has better capacity to move from externalization to combination and then internalization. Previously, at the organizational level, AS was largely engaged in the socialization mode.

This research will contribute to the organization in the form of knowledge assets (Nonaka et. al., 2001); conceptual knowledge assets that are described as explicit knowledge articulated through image. These knowledge assets could lead to other explicit materials for the organization. AS has already indicated to me that they would like to use the results of this research to create some explicit materials for the organization, such as brochures, training manuals, and/or interview protocols. AS has not assumed strategic planning activities as a vital part of the organization, where most for-profit organizations tend to assume that strategic planning is an essential element to the organization's operation. However, this research has underscored that strategic planning activities can be of importance to a CBO, without necessarily changing the fundamental nature of the organization. AS for example wants to maintain their identity and ability to react quickly in certain situations given the limited bureaucracy in the organization but also wants to have some elements of the organization more explicitly understood. Future activities for AS will likely be a negotiation of this line between what is to become explicit and what is to remain tacit.

The literature review showed that there is little research that has been done for community-based organizations (CBO) on knowledge management. It is not known whether or not this research will be applicable to other organizations; however, it is reasonable to think that other organizations similar to AS may be facing the same challenges in terms of funding and time, which prevent some of the explicit work from getting done because PAS take priority or simply surviving from day to day takes all the time and energy that the organization can muster. Other organizations may be able to apply some of what was discovered in this project.

An important implication for the larger body of KM literature is that the overarching concepts in Nonaka's theory of knowledge creation were useful in

articulating tacit knowledge. Therefore, this theory was applicable for AS, a CBO. The details and processes varied from Nonaka's description because he is modeling for a for-profit organization; however, the conceptual level of the theory proved quite useful in achieving the goals of the research.

### ***5.1 Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research***

This study only looked at one part of Nonaka's model. I only considered the externalization process, as that was pertinent to the research question. However, looking at the whole knowledge creation spiral in the organization could be an extension of the work that was done in this study by considering the whole process. The SECI model and related concepts of ba, tacit knowledge, and knowledge assets all contributed to making tacit knowledge explicit for AS. As a future research study, one could explore how the knowledge creation process could be managed. This part of Nonaka's framework was outside the scope of this research but it is important to recognize that he furthers the part of the framework I used for this research by describing how an organization can manage the knowledge creation process with leadership, specific organizational characteristics, and specific approaches to communication (Nonaka, 1994, Nonaka et. al, 2001). It would be valuable to explore the applicability of these concepts in a CBO.

All of the participants were interested and enthusiastic about the research before it began. Therefore, the focus group and face-to-face interviews were very engaging and participants required little prompting. Everyone appeared to be eager and prepared to discuss issues related to the research. This population might have some unique characteristics in the level of interest in the outcome and potential benefits of the research for their environment. As a follow-up to this research it would be good to see how the model was used, if at all, and how that impacted knowledge creation in the organization. It would be worth checking whether or not some more explicit materials have been developed and whether that led to any effects for the organization.

The study only included staff at AS and one board member. Volunteers, other board members, and PAS did not participate in the study. The limited nature and number of participants limit the scope of the study. Only the perspectives of staff and one board member are reflected in this study. Others could contribute to the richness of

the study by adding more data and interpretations. Future research could include interviews with PAS, volunteers, other board members, and other community organizations to discover their perspective of AS. Discovering what the different perceptions are of how the organization works and what that might mean for their activities in the future would be worthwhile. AS in the meantime is aware that this research only covers staff perspectives and caution will be taken in using the research responsibly.

Methodologically, the study is limited by the fact that the research is not generalizable to other organizations. However, this research is valid; the participants have verified the findings and I remained rigorous throughout the research as I described in previous sections.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

AS has had some challenges in their explicit knowledge documentation. They have had difficulty documenting tacit knowledge in the way that Nonaka suggests because of resource constraints. This research takes one piece of their tacit knowledge and represents it explicitly through themes and image: themes articulated tacit knowledge at AS in an explicit format, and the organizational model framed the knowledge by using metaphor.

This thesis has been developed in partial fulfillment of a Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. These findings may also be used for subsequent journal publication submissions. The results were shared with AS upon completion of the research. I provided AS with a copy of the themes as well as a summary of the themes that was more reader-friendly. They have also been provided with a copy of the organizational model and I will be giving them a bound copy of the thesis. The summary and model are products of the research that the organization identified as useful and relevant for their future use. (A copy of the summary provided to AS can be found in Appendix H). Upon finalization of the research, I will meet with the staff at AS to convey the results and to answer any questions that they may have about the research.

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## **APPENDIX A Focus Group Protocol**

Focus Group Protocol: *Making Tacit Knowledge Explicit: AIDS Saskatoon.*

1. Now that you are familiar with my research question, what do you think is important for me to ask or understand about AIDS Saskatoon?
2. What would you anticipate as the best outcome of this research project?
3. What would you like to see when this research is complete?
4. Is there any information about AIDS Saskatoon you would NOT like me to ask about?

# APPENDIX B Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: *Making Tacit Knowledge Explicit: AIDS Saskatoon.*

## Context

1. How long have you worked (been with) at AIDS Saskatoon?
2. What prompted you to want to work (be on the board) at this organization?
3. What has motivated you to stay?
4. What characteristics help to define AIDS Saskatoon?

## Communication

5. How does the staff communicate with each other? (formal meetings, email, face-to-face)
6. How do staff and People who Access Services (PAS) communicate?
7. How do staff and board members communicate?
8. What interaction does the board have with the organization?

## Decision-Making

9. How are decisions reached at AIDS Saskatoon? What roles do the staff, PAS, and board members have in decision-making at AIDS Saskatoon? Are there different decision-making “levels”?
10. What, if any, are significant barriers to decision-making at the organization?
11. What are the elements that make decision-making easy at AIDS Saskatoon?
12. What would improve your ability to make decisions?

## AIDS Saskatoon

13. What do you think is unique about the way staff at AIDS Saskatoon practices?
14. What do you think is unique about the organization itself, not just the staff?
15. How would you explain to an outsider what AIDS Saskatoon does and why?
16. What measures do you use to indicate that your work at AIDS Saskatoon is successful?

## Practice

17. How much of what you do in daily practice is a result of knowledge you have from formal training or research articles? What other factors inform practice?
18. How would you go about training someone to do your job?
19. What kind of information would have been helpful to you when you first started your job at AIDS Saskatoon?

## The Model

20. Can you look at this model and tell me in what ways it reflects AIDS Saskatoon? How it does NOT reflect AIDS Saskatoon? What is missing from the model? Would you have labeled any of the parts differently?
21. If AIDS Saskatoon were an animal, what kind of animal would it be?
22. Is there anything else about the organization that you think I should know or any final comments you would like to make?

## APPENDIX C Information Letter

Information Letter: *Making Tacit Knowledge Explicit: AIDS Saskatoon.*

### Researchers

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### Description of the Research

The purpose of this study is to discover the organizational strategy used by AIDS Saskatoon in its daily operations. The research will attempt to uncover the communication, decision-making, and culture of the organization through a focus group interview and face-to-face interviews. The audio-recorded focus group and face-to-face interviews consist of open-ended questions that will take approximately one hour to answer.

### Risks and Benefits of Participation

Participants may be identifiable from their interviews, given the small number of staff at the organization, so there is some risk that participants will be identifiable. To minimize this risk, all potentially identifying data will be kept confidential, unless otherwise authorized by the participant. Securing approval for transcript release will also minimize risk for participation, so that you will have the final say on information reported in the thesis. The information collected from participants is also not expected to be sensitive in nature, there are no questions asking you to evaluate AIDS Saskatoon or other staff members.

The focus group participants will be encouraged to keep the information discussed during the focus group interview confidential. However, there is no guarantee that information will not be shared outside of the focus group by the participants.

The consent forms, interview tapes, typed transcripts of interviews, transcript release forms, and all research field notes will be securely stored in a locked cabinet by my research supervisor, accessible only by the researcher and advisory committee, for a minimum of five years upon completion of the study. The consent forms and intent to participate forms will be stored separately from the other documents.

The research study has possible benefits for AIDS Saskatoon. It may provide the organization with an organizational framework for evaluation, training, and hiring purposes. It may also provide the organization with a deeper understanding of its communication, decision-making and culture, which could lead to more effective service delivery.

### **Confidentiality**

There are very few staff members at AIDS Saskatoon, so confidentiality is a concern with this research project. To try and keep the participants' responses confidential, I will eliminate any reference to names, the position or duties they have at AIDS Saskatoon. The participants will also never be identified by sex. You are under no obligation to talk about anything that you are uncomfortable sharing.

### **Right to Refuse/Withdraw**

Your participation in this project is strictly voluntary. You will suffer no consequences if you choose, or do not choose, to participate in this study. The time you spend at the focus group and at the interview will take place on work time, so you will not lose any wages if you choose to participate.

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, without any penalty. If you withdraw from the study, any data you have provided will be destroyed.

### **Meeting**

There will be an informational meeting on \_\_\_\_\_. You will have the chance to ask the researcher any questions or voice any concerns. The researcher will also be asking for your participation in a focus group and in-depth interviews.

*Thanks for your time!*

## APPENDIX D Intent to Participate

Intent to Participate: *Making Tacit Knowledge Explicit: AIDS Saskatoon.*

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### **Confidentiality**

There are very few staff members at AIDS Saskatoon, so confidentiality is a concern with this research project. To try and keep the participants' responses confidential, I will eliminate any reference to names, the position or duties they have at AIDS Saskatoon. The participants will also never be identified by sex. You are under no obligation to talk about anything that you are uncomfortable sharing.

### **Right to Refuse/Withdraw**

Your participation in this project is strictly voluntary. You will suffer no consequences if you choose, or do not choose, to participate in this study. The time you spend at the focus group and at the interview will take place on work time, so you will not lose any wages if you choose to participate.

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, without any penalty. If you withdraw from the study, any data you have provided will be destroyed. I have received a copy of this form for my records.

I will contact you shortly to let you know the time and place of the focus group, if you choose to participate.

I would like to participate in:

1. The focus group

Yes     No

2. A face-to-face interview

Yes     No

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_



## **APPENDIX E Consent Form (Focus Group)**

Consent Form (Focus Group): AIDS Saskatoon

*You are invited to participate in a study entitled Making Tacit Knowledge Explicit: AIDS Saskatoon. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.*

### **Researchers**

Alexa Briggs  
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[dorothy.forbes@usask.ca](mailto:dorothy.forbes@usask.ca)

### **Description of the Research**

The purpose of this study is to discover the organizational strategy used by AIDS Saskatoon in its daily operations. The research will attempt to uncover the communication, decision-making, and culture of the organization through a focus group and interviews. The interview consists of open-ended questions that will take approximately one hour to answer. This form indicates your consent to participate in the focus group, which will take approximately one hour and will be audio-recorded.

### **Potential Risks and Benefits**

The project has possible benefits for AIDS Saskatoon. It may provide the organization with an organizational framework for evaluation, training, and hiring purposes. It may also provide the organization with a deeper understanding of its communication, decision-making and culture, which could lead to more effective service delivery.

The focus group participants will be encouraged to keep the information discussed during the focus group interview confidential. However, there is no guarantee that information will not be shared outside of the focus group.

The consent forms, interview tapes, typed transcripts of interviews, transcript release forms, and all research field notes will be securely stored in a locked cabinet by my research supervisor in the College of Nursing, accessible only by the researcher and advisory committee, for a minimum of five years. The consent forms and intent to participate forms will be stored separately from the other documentation.

### **Confidentiality**

There will be no reference to any person's name, position, or sex in the focus group transcript.

### **Right to Withdraw**

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, without any penalty. If you withdraw from the study, any data you have provided will be destroyed.

### **Questions**

Throughout the interview process you are encouraged to comment on the research process and ask questions. Please feel free to contact the researchers at any point during the research process with any questions or concerns. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board on **May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005**. Any questions to your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the offices of research services at 966-2084. The results of the study will be made available to the organization after I have completed the analysis. I will provide a brief presentation and summary of the research results to all interested parties at the organization.

### **Consent to Participate**

I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

---

(Signature of Participant)

---

(Date)

---

(Signature of Researcher)

## **APPENDIX F Consent Form (Interview)**

Consent Form (Interview): AIDS Saskatoon

*You are invited to participate in a study entitled Making Tacit Knowledge Explicit: AIDS Saskatoon. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.*

### **Researchers**

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### **Description of the Research**

The purpose of this study is to discover the organizational strategy used by AIDS Saskatoon in its daily operations. The research will attempt to uncover the communication, decision-making, and culture of the organization through a focus group and interviews. The interview consists of open-ended questions that will take approximately one hour to answer. With your consent, this interview will be audio-recorded. This form indicates your consent to participate in the interview.

### **Potential Risks**

Participants may be identifiable, given the small number of staff at the organization, so there is some risk that participants will be identifiable. To minimize this risk, all potentially identifying data will be kept confidential, unless otherwise authorized by the participant. Securing approval for transcript release will also minimize risk for participation, so that you will have the final say on information reported in the research. The information collected from participants is also not expected to be sensitive in nature, there are no questions asking you to evaluate AIDS Saskatoon or other staff members.

The research study has possible benefits for AIDS Saskatoon. It may provide the organization with an organizational framework for evaluation, training, and hiring purposes. It may also provide the organization with a deeper understanding of its communication, decision-making and culture, which could lead to more effective service delivery.

The consent forms, interview tapes, typed transcripts of interviews, transcript release forms, and all research field notes will be securely stored in a locked cabinet by my research supervisor in the College of Nursing, accessible only by the researcher and advisory committee, for a minimum of five years. The consent forms and intent to participate forms will be stored separately from the other documentation.

### **Confidentiality**

There are very few staff members at AIDS Saskatoon, so confidentiality is a concern with this research project. To try and keep the participants responses confidential, I will eliminate any reference to the position or duties they have at AIDS Saskatoon. The participants will also never be identified by sex. You are under no obligation to talk about anything that you are uncomfortable sharing.

### **Right to Withdraw**

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, without any penalty. If you withdraw from the study, any data you have provided will be destroyed.

### **Questions**

Throughout the interview process you are encouraged to comment on the research process and ask questions. Please feel free to contact the researchers at any point during the research process with any questions or concerns. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board on **May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005**. Any questions to your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the offices of research services at 966-2084. The results of the study will be made available to the organization after I have completed the analysis. I will provide a brief presentation and summary of the research results to the organization.

### **Consent to Participate**

I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

I agree to have this interview tape-recorded  Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

## APPENDIX G Transcript Release Form

Data/Transcript Release Form:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Alexa Briggs. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Alexa Briggs to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX H Research Summary for AIDS Saskatoon

Organizational change over the last 5 years has led to some unrest in the organization. The problem that I considered as a result of some of the changes: Processes are not explicitly documented and knowledge is largely “inside” individuals in the organization (tacit knowledge), rather than a shared resource for the organization itself (explicit knowledge).

### Themes from Interviews

Analysis was organized around three organizational processes: *Communication*, *Decision-Making*, and *Organizational Culture*. The next section summarizes all of the themes around these organizational processes. These themes represent tacit knowledge at AS; this knowledge has not before been written down in any comprehensive format.

#### *Communication*

- Non-verbal communication
  - Often occurs because of safety issues.
  - Need skills in perception and environment awareness to pick up on cues from coworkers and identify potentially difficult situations.
  - Have to have *trust* in co-workers to respond based on non-verbal cues.
  
- Verbal Communication
  - Often occurs in the kitchen, where people talked productively about work and appreciated learning about each other as people.
  - Can be “harried”, “frenzied”, “in the moment”, “fluid”
  - Time presents a challenge for regular communication, which can lead to missing out on information.

#### *Decision-making*

- Independent but Collaborative
  - Freedom to make choices but expected to ask for feedback.
  - Expected to take initiative.
  - PAS are consulted regularly for decisions in the organization.
  - Need skills in *perception* to identify things that need to be done.

#### *Organizational Culture*

- AS is Unique
  - AS is not like other organizations
  - A way of creating identity, often talked about what AS is *not*.
  
- Words Should be put into Action
  - Try to minimize the disconnect between what they say and what they do.
  - Important to understand how to *apply* beliefs.
  - Important to have strong self-awareness.
  - Staff do not all have the same beliefs but all perceived their role at AS as a commitment to addressing social issues.

- AS Believes in Providing a Safe Space
  - Self-determinism, where PAS determine their own needs because it is patronizing to assume that someone is incapable of making decisions for themselves.
  - The services provided are just as important as the *way* they are delivered: in a way that doesn't make anyone feel less of a person that is deserving of dignity and respect.
  - Open doors to everyone regardless of their substance use, and people self-direct in the organization.
  - Need skills in perception to pick up on the cues from PAS and what they might need.
  - Need to be able to see people as people.
  
- Work at AS is about Building Relationships
  - Everyone at AS is a human being.
  - Work is about connections not about "helping" or "serving".
  - PAS is a deliberate term, they are not clients and staff are not professionals.
  - Must be emotionally vulnerable.
  - Must have some boundaries.
  
- Critical Reflection
  - A way to constantly improve practice.
  - Must have the willingness and ability to learn, which is more important than what someone already knows.

### **Org Model or Org Chart of AS**

- Not everyone liked this visual representation but others have received it very well in the past as a powerful image, so, I've included it in the thesis and now turn it over to AS staff to use as they see fit.
- This kind of explicit representation cannot replace tacit knowledge; it becomes an addition to the store of knowledge already at AS.
- Key processes of AS, decision-making, communication, and organizational culture, along with organization members, are represented in a metaphorical organizational model.
- The model is a deer, a living thing, which represents the organization itself; all the parts function as a whole just as a living organism functions as a unified being. The living organism also represents the way the organization learns, as an active, context-sensitive being, without the assumption that the process is linear.
- The brain represents decision-making, the nerves represent communication, the heart represents culture, the lungs represent PAS, and the skeletal structure represents staff, volunteers, and board members. Each part of the model reflects the role that each of the processes play in the organization, not as separate entities but as interconnected and dependent on one another.

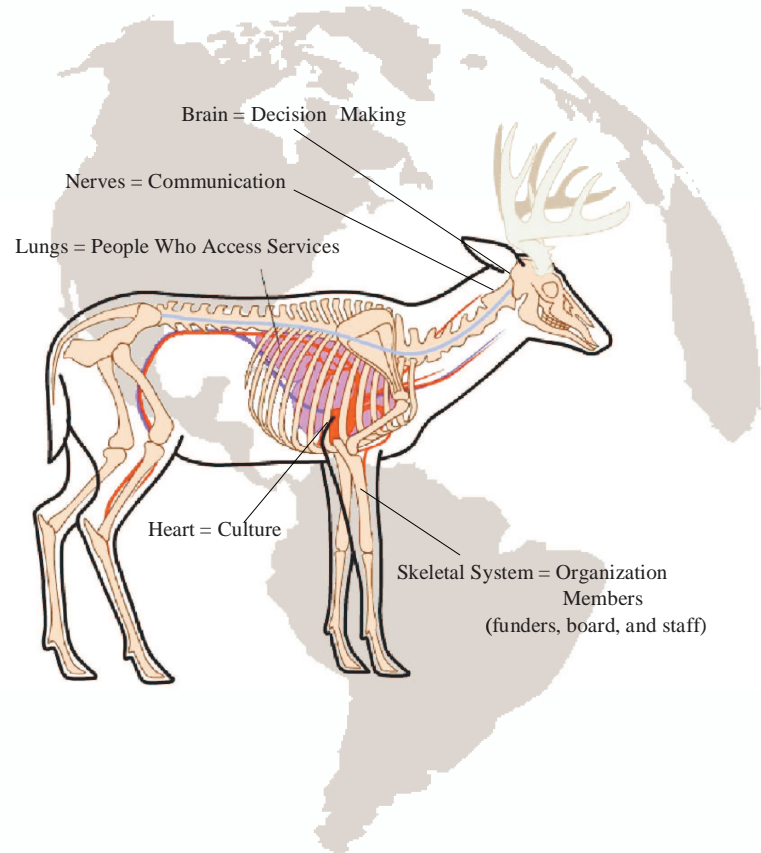


Figure 1: Organizational Model of AIDS Saskatoon

- Another part of the model is the appearance of “gaia” or the earth behind the organizational model. This relationship is meant to symbolize the place of the organization. AS does not exist in isolation but is part of a larger community that it impacts and is impacted by.
- The conceptual image and association is different than in reading a chart. The mind has to make some creative links that it would not have to do with a more straightforward representation; hence, the image captures more meaning than a chart can. A unique organizational model is important for AS; a uni-dimensional representation of the organization would not capture enough of the essence.



### **My Reflections**

I would like to thank everyone who participated in this study. Everyone was very forthcoming and the interviews were very engaging. Since everyone shared with me so freely, I'd like to share some of the most important things I learned about myself by doing this research:

- I learned that I make a lot of judgments about people! I took away a whole new understanding of non-judgmental!
- I learned that I have sometimes treated people in a way that, while well intentioned, was probably patronizing.
- I learned that sometimes the best thing you can do for someone, is just to be around, no action, helpful suggestions, or advice required.
- I learned that while words are powerful, the actions associated with those words send the loudest messages.