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Creating Change Fast — that Lasts

By Jay W. Vogt



Nonprofit organizations today enjoy options they've never had before—to bring unprecedented numbers of stakeholders literally to the same table—to share views, find common ground, and make plans – in less time than ever.

Those organizations want change. They usually want it fast, and they always want it to last. Often they say: “We want to create a shared vision of the future for our organization with buy-in from everyone.” or they say: “Help us find common ground among a diverse (and, by the way, conflicted) set of stakeholders.”

I say, “Fine. Let’s get everyone in the same room.” In years past, that might have meant convening a small strategic planning committee that made a plan and then sold that plan to the organization. Or it might have meant gathering a representative set of stakeholders who negotiated common ground, and then told everyone else what they found.

Over the years, though, we’ve learned that doesn’t work so well, and here’s the simple reason why: people support what they help create. The corollary is: People don’t support what they don’t help create. What does this mean for change processes? Simply put, we’ve got to get everyone in the same room.

That means if you’re a community college, for example, you don’t just involve some administrators and a few full-time faculty. You involve staff, adjunct faculty, students, alumni, people from institutions that send you students, people from companies that hire your students, neighbors, and leaders shaping the world in which you do business. And if you want those stakeholders to influence each other, to help them see beyond their own small view of that institution’s future to a newer, larger, and shared view, you have to get them in the same room together at the same time.

This line of thinking leads us to some very big rooms! At Bunker Hill Community College, for example, the president convenes a gathering of 250 people every three years (all the stakeholders mentioned above) to set goals for the next three years all in one day. That’s a pretty big risk! What if it doesn’t go well? But there is a huge payoff when it does! After the first such session, the development officer reported, “This saved a year of my time building relationships. Now when I call, instead of saying ‘Who are you?’ these folks say, ‘How can I help?’” The college has literally transformed itself over 10 years by getting everyone in the same room.

The design principles behind such a meeting are simple, yet profound:

- Get the “whole system” in the room
- Have participants self-manage their work
- Engage participants in building a common database together
- Help participants find common ground through dialogue, not problem-solving

Two facilitators can work with 250 participants if they are organized into 30 plus tables of eight, each with their own volunteer facilitator, time-keeper, recorder, reporter, and data managers, all working with carefully preplanned tasks. That means participants are helping each other be productive and taking responsibility for their perceptions and actions.

Such gatherings don’t need long presentations by experts if all the expertise you want is already in the room seated at the tables. When inviting stakeholders we think of the 3 Is – who is Informed about the task, who can Influence it, and who will be Impacted by it? We trust each other to know what is best for the organization, and we trust ourselves to risk seeing the world through the eyes of others.

Lastly, these kinds of meetings raise too many issues, and introduce too much diversity, to resolve them all. So we emphasize listening to understand, not to judge, and seeking common ground through dialogue, not problem-solving,

as our main means of communicating.

These same principles guide gatherings across organizations (even competing ones) in areas of collaborative interest. Consider these Stakeholder Summits:

- 100 green energy CEOs set 2020 clean energy targets and formed a statewide clean energy council in half a day;
- 250 nonprofit leaders formed a common agenda and founded a statewide nonprofit association in two days;
- 75 national leaders envisioned the future role of simulation in health care in a day.

It's scary. There are lots of moving parts. But ultimately the best way to create change fast – that lasts – is to get everyone in the same room.

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