

Participatory Leadership at Work

Reflections upon an Organization's Development Process

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On a Monday morning in February 2010, the workday began a little differently at The Center for Human Development (CHD) in La Grande Oregon. Each of the more than fifty staff members arriving at 8:00 were greeted and welcomed into a large circle in the entrance lobby. This was the first day of work in the beautiful new office and clinic space where public health and behavioral health services would be provided to the residents of Union County Oregon. After 23 years of putting up with crowded, dingy and depressing space in a dilapidated old converted hospital, the nonprofit organization finally had space that bestowed honor and respect befitting the staff and clients.

In the center of the circle were a bouquet of flowers, a large fresh copy of the floor plans for the remodeling and three bowling pins representing the bowling alley that had been gutted and renovated. One of the bowling pins was passed as a talking piece and everyone was invited to share the emotions that they had experienced walking in the door that morning. Some expressed surprise as the entire operations had been moved over the long weekend and the building seemed amazingly ready for business. Others expressed pride, hope, and gratitude while others acknowledged their exhaustion from the two year project.

Following the check-in, everyone was invited to step into the center of the circle and express their hope and intention for how they wanted to inhabit the new space. A new environment invites new ways of being together and so this new episode in CHD's history was marked by the sacred ritual of declaring intentions and writing them on the floor plans. In addition to numerous tear stains, the plans for CHD's new home included words and phrases like "welcome", "productive habits", "mindful", "client" (with a heart around the word), "attitude of service", "cocoon", "peaceful vitality", "joy", "positive energy", "respect", "intimate", "harmony" and "healing". After announcements about processes for addressing the inevitable systems problems, there was a check-out and everyone left to find their new offices and begin serving their clients.

That welcome circle was a new experience in the history of CHD but it was a very fitting way to begin the new life together in the new space. In many ways, the new building was the result of many, many circle processes over the prior two years. CHD has practiced participatory leadership with self-organizing teams for over 20 years so when the decision was made to actively pursue a new facility, it made sense to appoint co-facilitators, Roni Wood and Steve Ryman, to host the process of acquiring, designing and occupying new space and everyone assumed that the process would include input from everyone in the organization.

The process began with a World Café event in which staff, clients and community partners expressed their visions for the new facility. This became the basis for a set of values and principles which guided the entire process. A Facility Planning Workgroup representing the various parts of the organization

met throughout the two year process to coordinate decision making. On more than one occasion when the fate of the project was at risk due to financial or regulatory issues, creative ideas emerged from diverse circles including bankers, board members, architects, builders and government officials. Many of these people were not accustomed to the participatory processes utilized at CHD and expressed amazement at the creative solutions that emerged from the process. Once the actual renovation began Roni and Steve, along with Rico, CHD's financial Coordinator, met in a small circle with key construction personnel on a weekly basis and included the architect as needed. Again, the feedback from the contractor and the architect is that they had never been involved in such a collaborative and team-oriented building project and the quality of the design decisions and ability to maintain a very tight construction schedule reflected the quality of this process and the quality of the relationships that had developed. Finally, a process of multiple interlocking circles supported a very complicated moving process which elicited appreciative comments from the moving company who could not believe how much was accomplished in such a short time. As anxious as everyone was to leave the old building, there was still a lot of history and a sense of loss to acknowledge. In order to create a healthy new beginning we needed to honor our past and acknowledge the losses. In the final days in the old building, all of the staff were invited to bring artifacts and stories to a circle where we shared and processed the end of an era and created a time capsule to memorialize it.

On that February morning, over two years of work and innumerable circle process culminated with the celebration of our first morning in the new building. The circle was a portal in which emotions and hopes flowed freely and welcomed the organization into the opportunity for moving forward into a new shared experience. In the circle that morning was Rob, the construction superintendent who had worked so intensively with us for the previous several months. At the end of our circle, Rob was close to tears as he thanked us for allowing him to experience the circle process. In his entire career of creating buildings and spaces for people to live and work, he said that he had never before known what it really meant to the people who would inhabit those spaces. This, he said, made the project all the more meaningful and special. For CHD, something new and alive was born that morning and hopefully CHD's clients will be the beneficiaries for years to come.

Steve Ryman left CHD a few months after the conclusion of the building project. In his 35 years at CHD he developed skills of participatory leadership and hosting change processes in healthcare. He continues to live in La Grande Oregon and to offer personal coaching, conversational leadership and hosting/facilitation services throughout the world (with a special connection to Kufunda Village in Zimbabwe). You can learn more about Steve on his website: www.itineriscoaching.com or you can write to him at sryman@gmail.com.

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