

Envisioning Community Change: The Real Beginning to the Journey

By Jane Garthson

How often have I heard, or even said, that statement? It is meant to encourage people to take some small action towards their dream. A thousand miles can seem impossible, but surely anyone can take one step.

But no true journey begins with a single step. From any given point, we can move in many directions. We make choices about our destination, our route and our means of travel. Then we know what direction to step. So we have a vision of what success looks like—reaching our intended destination, or in the case of community benefit organizations, our ideal world.

Why then do people in organizations take many steps in different, almost random, directions? Without a vision of what overall success looks like, their decisions about which way to step are made in isolation. Often no progress is made towards a better community. With an inspiring destination in mind, we might chose better options that work in harmony towards that destination, and leverage resources much more effectively. The destination will inspire others to walk with us, and provide support along the way. And if we harness our efforts and enthusiasm towards creating strength, we are much less likely to choose programs that maintain dependency.

There are proven, practical, realistic methodologies to align your efforts towards a common dream, and make faster progress than you had dreamt possible. They can be used by the community as a whole, by some subset of the community, by a single organization, by an informal group, or even by one individual. Or go bigger—the steps can be used by international organizations and by groups of countries, or by related organizations or professionals around

*The journey of a thousand miles
begins with one step.*

—Lao Tzu



about the organization, bring them back to talking about the community instead. Remind them that resources limit how fast you achieve the ideal, not what the ideal is.

Often, people who never could agree on anything before find that they really do agree on the world they are trying to create—the disagreements had been about methods or speed. Sometimes, they find out who is holding them back—like a young professional employee who told us her ideal world was one in which the organization was still struggling to build awareness of the problem! No wonder no real progress was being made in her area; she was carefully ensuring lifelong employment for herself. This was not intentional; she had just been taught to limit her dreams to what was “realistic.”

What is not realistic is to think there will ever be enough resources to serve a community or a world defined by weaknesses and growing needs. Deciding on the right small steps to build on strengths, to not only decrease need but increase abundance, is the only realistic route to a better future. The community might not be a lot better at first, but it will be somewhat better, and the steps are at least in the right direction.

So if the drawings are in conflict, talk it through. An hour of guided discussion might save hundreds of hours in future decision-making. Perhaps the table that drew a picture of dependency will be inspired by other visions in the room, and willing to put theirs aside. Perhaps they realize the values depicted are not really what they want for their community. Or perhaps their vision is so incompatible that it makes no sense to remain involved with that organization. Now they know to move on, and will no longer be holding your organization back.

Once there is consensus, or a clear parting of the ways, a small working group can take away the ideas and create an elegant vision statement. To keep the vision short enough to remember, there might also be a list of goals that elaborate on the ideal community.

Creative Communicating

I prefer to use crayons and flip charts and ask for pictures. It creates a new power dynamic, as the leader with the big ego and loud voice might not feel confident in his or her drawing ability, and the new intern or shy client might. Besides, in Western culture, we all drew as children but most of us stopped by the time we were teenagers. We seem to need our inner child back to dream of what is possible. Be flexible about how the creative process unfolds—if a group prefers to sing or dance their ideas, why not? At this stage, words hold us back, but there are many ways to communicate without words.

Pictures reveal values faster than any dialogue ever could. For the health sector, for example, is the ideal future focused on the latest and best health care, or on helping people lead healthy lives with minimal dependency on health care? The pictures will show how different people in the room are really thinking, and whether there are similarities, small differences or chasms to discuss.



Think about history. If some people once felt that it was okay for others to be slaves so some could have a life of ease and comfort, and others felt that all humanity deserved freedom and a chance for a better life, those ideas could not peacefully co-exist indefinitely. Was some dissent worthwhile so the better set of ethical values could prevail?

Usually, the conflict is really between optimists and pessimists, and whoever wins control will make their prediction come true. Countries that have believed high rates of AIDS-HIV could be significantly reduced now have lower rates than those who believed it couldn't. Think about your situation. Would you rather work or volunteer with those who are focused on changing a bad situation into a better one, or with those who see themselves forever fighting a losing battle?

food for thought

equitable distribution of wealth and such. In other cases, those words will never be heard but there will be numerous references to the natural environment, lifelong health, supportive families and productive lives. Another gathering will focus on the right of individuals to live to their fullest potential, including the joy of creating and enjoying art in all its forms. A whole community get-together might have all of these and many more.

Never assume a single word or short phrase has a shared meaning among the participants, because it never does. Some dialogue will be needed as people explain what they meant, and perhaps find more acceptable words for some that provoked a negative reaction. Most groups will move towards inspirational terms such as peace rather than “absence of violence” but there is no right answer.

Once there is some agreement on key values, again hive this off into a separate working group to develop sentences about each concept and bring them back for more dialogue. Never “wordsmith” in a large group.

If the group has a good current set of ethical values, well described, amending them to reflect the new vision might take very little time. If this is the first time the organization has created real values statements, not just lists of words, but everyone is in the room, a day might be needed.

Many groups find they can establish the key concepts and give a working group sufficient guidance in about an hour and half after starting the session, by the way. But if there is no history of working together, and an environment of distrust or significant lack of knowledge about each other's backgrounds and organizations, it might take several significantly longer sessions.

2. Recognize the ethical values implicit in the dream that has been described, and know that you cannot create a community based on those values by using methods that violate those values.

The pictures or descriptions will have certain words in common, or synonyms, when people talk about them. Certain words like “caring” show up over and over. In some gatherings, there will be numerous references to social justice,

In larger organizations, where different locations and teams need to be consulted, at least two sessions will be needed.

3. Identify what needs to change in your community for the dream to become real.

Brainstorm to create what will probably be a long list of areas where people are dissatisfied. Include everything, even those that are the responsibilities of higher levels of government or that seem unchangeable. The steps in the journey might include advocacy to influence government, or primary research into a disease that has always been with us. (As I write this article, my local paper reports on promising research that could eliminate malaria!)

Talk a bit about what makes sense to tackle first, as prerequisites to other changes, but remember that others might see a different critical path. The neighbors on a street might see beautifying the street and holding a party as the first step, while those in another neighborhood are focused on a new school and others are planting trees to improve air quality. At this stage there is often great enthusiasm and energy. As long as the ideas are not in conflict, and are based on informal volunteering, they can proceed concurrently.

4. Choose your role in changing one or more of those conditions towards the ideal.

Within an organization, however, wise use of limited resources must be considered.

The organizations involved need to meet on their own to discuss their own choices. They have not lost any independence by participating in the larger discussion, but they have likely committed by now to transparency about their choices to the other participants. They have likely also committed to meeting again, or regularly, to coordinate efforts.

It might be that the new choices are consistent with the current mission or purpose statements; it might not. Many mission statements are all about the organization and nothing about supporting a vision for a better world or community. Many are about serving a “forever” need and people no longer see the need as existing forever.

Do you see now why starting with the mission makes no sense? There is no purpose in having strong, financially sustainable nonprofits excellent in customer service if they are not making the community better. Nonprofits should be the means to an end, not the end in themselves.

This discussion could take an hour or it could take much longer. The mission or purpose statement will guide every subsequent decision; the ideas in it really matter and important discussions should not be cut off.

5. Set your priorities for carrying out that role starting today, guided by the ethical values and leveraging today’s resources.

