



Stakeholder Dialogue: Can We Talk our Way to a Greener Future?

By Deborah Fleischer

"We are convinced that collaborative multi-stakeholder engagement is the only way to create sustainable change industry wide."

The Gap, Social Responsibility Report

After World Environmental Day: How to Transform Your Commitment to Action Into Systemic Change?

After attending a corporate social responsibility (CSR) symposium and a group dialogue on environmental purchasing as part of World Environment Day (WED), I feel energized and a bit more hopeful about our future. As the excitement and energy of WED fades, back at my desk, I am pondering the questions, "How do we transform our commitment and enthusiasm for doing things differently into action? Where do we start?"

Whether you are a land conservation organization working to acquire or restore a key property or a governmental entity intrigued by the concept of starting an environmental purchasing program, stakeholder dialogue is a potential tool to help you move forward by engaging key parties with differing values and perspectives in a way that will create buy-in, build support, and lead to action.

Future Search: A Tool to Consider

One potential tool to consider putting in the toolbox is Future Search (see www.futuresearch.net). Founded by Marvin Wiesbord and Sandra Janoff, Future Search is an approach to finding common ground among large, diverse groups and creating actions in organizations and communities. Based on a set of principles that incorporate years and years of organizational development wisdom, Future Search holds the potential to result in actions that lead to systemic change.

As summarized in Wiesbord and Janoff's book *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities*, a Future Search can "release creative energy leading to projects none of us can do alone. People simultaneously discover mutual values, innovative ideas, commitment, and support."

The typical Future Search design includes a three-day agenda. If the idea of getting a three-day commitment from participants seems daunting, I believe the basic principles

can be incorporated into a shorter dialogue to improve your chances of transforming talk into effective action.

As part of WED, I attended a four-hour dialogue on environmental purchasing hosted by the City of San Francisco. The facilitators incorporated some of the key Future Search principles into the design, and while the event didn't deliver the full benefits of a complete Future Search, it was very effective at facilitating the exchange of ideas, energizing folks, and seeding the creation of innovative solutions.

Benefits of Dialogue

While seen as risky by some, there are advantages to be gained by engaging key stakeholders in open dialogue. For businesses, authentic dialogue can help you spot emerging issues and priorities and create opportunities for collaboration to improve your performance, allowing you to avoid the brand value impairment and bad press associated with a highly visible NGO corporate campaigns.

Dialogue with your stakeholders can also:

- Strengthen your relationships with the people, communities, and organizations you affect;
- Provide buy-in and support for new initiatives;
- Improve environmental and economic performance;
- Make your company more attractive to socially responsible investors;
- Result in product differentiation and increase brand recognition;
- Increase employee morale; and
- If structured correctly, result in new actions and change.

Key Elements of Dialogue

What are the key elements that make for successful stakeholder dialogue? Based on the Future Search principles, I propose four key elements to a successful stakeholder dialogue:

1. Get the "whole system" in the room;
2. Enhance shared understanding before you try to fix anything;
3. Make future action the goal—don't focus on intractable issues; and
4. Allow the group to self-manage and organize.

Get the "Whole System" in the Room

A successful dialogue starts in the planning and how you define the system--the trick is to identify all the possible people who can contribute. "The systemic change happens in the planning. You can get something new to happen if the right people are in the room," says Wiesbord.

For the environmental purchasing dialogue, the organizers were successful in including a variety of stakeholders, including federal, state, and local government agencies, purchasers, certifiers, manufacturers and suppliers, and non-profits. It was impressive

how much I learned in a short amount of time, after talking to a broad array of stakeholders.

Enhance Shared Understanding: Explore the Whole Before Fixing Any Part

A key condition for effective dialogue is to help all parties to get a clear picture of each other's reality. To foster new insights, put your issue into a bigger, global context, explore past milestones and current trends, and coach participants to listen for what is starting to build and to notice deeper patterns. It also supports learning to incorporate mixed-group, stakeholder-group, and large-group interactions into the design.

At the environmental purchasing dialogue, after a presentation put environmental purchasing into the broader global context, the meeting was transformed into an interactive experience. We rotated from table to table in mixed groups, speaking with different stakeholders about their experiences and also had the opportunity to spend time with others from our unique stakeholder group.

Make Future Action the Goal

"We often spend 80 percent of our time talking about the 20 percent of the stuff we disagree on. Future Search turns that on its head, and instead of focusing on how do we deal with the conflicts, we focus on what we share in common. And when you start doing this, the whole energy shifts. It changes the whole picture," explains Kenoli Oleari, a facilitator of Future Search meetings.

A true Future Search agenda includes time for stakeholder groups to create ideal future scenarios, identify common ground, develop possible projects, conduct action planning, and share publicly action commitments. At the WED dialogue, time limitations prevented us from fully exploring future actions. However, we participated in a simple, yet powerful, exercise where individuals had the opportunity to share action commitments with the larger group.

Allow the Group to Self-Manage and Organize

When a diverse group begins to explore its past, present, and future, there are some typical reactions one can expect from a group, including anxiety and confusion. While most people are uncomfortable when a group hits a state of confusion or high anxiety, Weisbord and Janoff have found that staying in the confusion space a little longer than people really want to often leads to a group's most creative and meaningful work.

While other facilitation and group dynamic models call for interventions during conflict, under the Future Search model, you don't try to repair or facilitate interpersonal conflicts. There are trained facilitators in the room, but the key roles of the facilitator are to create a safe space, keep the group working, and to help the group maintain a level of anxiety that supports creativity while allowing people to stay engaged. There is a thin tightrope facilitators must walk: maintaining enough "heat" to support the group's creativity, while avoiding so much intensity that someone in the group gets scorched or burned.

Conclusion

So, can we talk our way to a greener future? A tool like Future Search, that incorporates a whole systems approach to problem solving, is a potential tool to help us successfully foster change in the system. It requires a leap of faith into the concept that the knowledge and wisdom we need to solve our problems are present when we have the right people in the room.

As a baby step, you can try incorporating some of the above concepts into your next meeting and see what happens. At the end of the environmental purchasing dialogue, when participants were asked to share one word with the group, I heard an array of positive feelings, including “insight, energized, hope, gratitude, network, relief, recommitment, fresh, success, determination,” not bad results after only a few hours.

Deborah Fleischer, principal of Green Impact, works with overworked, understaffed directors at land conservation organizations who are struggling to identify acquisition priorities, acquire a key property, or start a new program. Green Impact maximizes the potential for success and generates buy-in and support from key stakeholders by providing services in project management, stakeholder outreach and dialogue, strategy development, communications, and fundraising.

Ms. Fleischer has over 20 years of experience working with NGOs and businesses on environmental, land conservation, and sustainability challenges. Her unique background includes a Master of Environmental Studies from the Yale School of Forestry and a Master in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School. She has worked with a variety of conservation organizations, including Sustainable Conservation, California Environmental Dialogue, Sonoma Land Trust, and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council. For more information, see www.greenimpact.com. She can be reached at Deborah@greenimpact.com.