Introduction to Community Conversations: capturing creative wisdom

Helping people to feel comfortable, to contribute willingly, to listen respectfully, to consider deeply, and to decide wisely.

SEGRA Conference
GEELONG, Victoria
Tuesday 25th October, 2011
Exercise

- Quietly and individually, with no discussion at all, please put your mind to the following ......

1. Consider a conversation that recently occurred in your community.
2. With respect to that conversation, what worked? What didn’t? Why?

- Individually, write down your reflections. These thoughts will help deepen the ideas that follow.
No certainty and no right

- Most of today’s communities did not exist 200 years ago.
- Communities sprang up because of some social or economic opportunity.
- People chose to move to the new location.
- The reason for the creation of many communities no longer exists.
- Unless a community can reinvent itself and keep itself relevant, it will die. In Australia, over the last 200 years, many have.
Exercise

Write down ..... 

(a) The name of a regional community that has downsized or died when it lost its primary reason for being.

(b) The name of a regional community that has reinvented itself.
Community vitality is the result of lots of individual mobility choices
Who moves, who doesn’t, and why?

- Innovative and creative people have the highest mobility. They seek a location that is welcoming and attractive.

- Innovative people move out of a location that is unwelcoming, leaving behind a conservative monoculture. The innovative talent that we crave, we may already have. We sometimes chase it away, or effectively silence it.

- Our responsibility is to create a welcoming environment that permits our communities to reinvent themselves and to thrive. One way we do this is through how we construct our community conversations.
'I may not remember what you said to me. Yet, I’ll always remember how you made me feel.'

So how do we make our residents and our visitors feel?
Newcomers and the establishment

- There is sometimes tension between newcomers (who want to offer ideas) and the establishment (who want to preserve things).
- How do they make each other feel?
- Balancing the conservatives and the innovators.
- A story: The doctor, the hospital and the ‘gang of four’.
Exercise

- Reflect upon the concept of mobility choice.
- Who has elected to move into your community, and what have they brought with them?
- Who has elected to move out of your community, and what did they take with them?
Invest in Community Conversations

How we speak and listen to each other is the medium through which a more positive future is either created or denied.

Peter Block, Civic Engagement, 2005
How we speak and listen to each other is commonly called ‘Discussion’.

A short-coming of discussion is how it can make people feel.
The shortcomings of discussion:

“an impatience to interrupt each other, and the uneasiness of being interrupted ourselves; flooding listeners with self-indulgent talk; overemphasizing the importance of being witty; using jargon to show off; and the custom of pushing women aside during serious discourse.”

Jonathan Swift (1728),
A Complete Collection of Polite and Ingenious Conversations.
In our community discussions, which of the following pairs is more likely to be influential?
Social influence (cont.)

- There are sound evolutionary reasons for these influences.
- They are largely unconscious.
- They are largely irrelevant in a modern world.
- Wisdom and ideas are not dependent upon these influences.
- We need to create ways of holding conversations and making decisions that eliminate these influences.
A story about primates
The role of leaders in fostering creative community conversations
Social influences (cont.)

Community groups commonly make decisions by ..... 
- Exhaustion 
- Irritation or urgency 
- Social dominance 
- Expertise 
- Putting a motion to the hands 

None of these methods utilise the available wisdom. Nor do they generate broad commitment.
The problem with decision-making

We think we are *rational* human beings.

We are not.

Generally decision-making is poor, because of
(a) unconscious influences, and ...
(b) poor decision tools.
A Surprise

‘a group of diverse and independent people will make the wisest decisions when they do not talk with each other.’

Wisest decisions are made when....

- People are independent,
- Have diversity of opinion,
- Are decentralised,
- Are anonymous,
- Where ideas can be subject to peer review,
- Where ideas can be pooled,
- Where selection is made individually and privately from that pool of ideas,
- Where results are aggregated,
- Where the process is completely transparent.

Voices in the conversation: the eight stakeholder groups
‘Community Conversations’, also known as ‘Meetings without Discussion’, are a suite of behaviours deliberately designed so that every participant feels valued.
Meetings without Discussion

Productive techniques for halving meeting time whilst doubling fun, wisdom and commitment.

Ian Plowman PhD
It is the only method of engagement that I will now use.

Thank you

Jim Fitzgerald
Community Development
Townsville Regional Council
Where these tools are used

- Management and team meetings
- Strategic planning
- Community consultation
- Council meetings
- Clubs and association committees
- Indigenous leadership
- Teleconferences
The Benefits

- Greater individual participation
- Greater creativity
- Removal of disagreements
- Improved quality of decisions
- Substantially reduced time
- Substantial financial savings
- Greater willingness for future participation
A testimonial:

We had our first team meeting this morning and we used some of the strategies from the workshop. It worked!!!

Rather than going up to half an hour overtime we finished 15 minutes in front with twice as much content covered.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!
The Cost

- Self awareness
- Awareness of the behaviour of the group
- Self-discipline - to act in the interests of the group
- A desire to do things better

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The Take-Home Message

- Presently community conversations tend to use processes and methods that may lead to suboptimal outcomes.

- ‘Community Conversations’ – aka ‘Meetings without Discussion’ are a suite of methods that provide new and effective skills, freeing up the creative wisdom that surrounds us, while helping all participants feel valued.
Want to know more?

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Comments or questions are welcome