

Learnings from Practice 12: Generative Questions to Review Values, Success, Vision

How to encourage the valuing of many different perspectives in determining a team vision?

The Request. A newly hired Director of a Public Affairs/Communications Division of a large government agency requested assistance in establishing a new vision with a related set of new skills. The Director was concerned that the growing sophisticated needs of their internal clients was outpacing current staff abilities. He wanted assistance in designing a retreat that would create a more unified team while encouraging all voices to be expressed, especially those who were reluctant and hesitant about what the new vision would mean to them.

Larger Context. Two staff subgroups had emerged in response to the Directors desire for a new vision and companion 2-year implementation plan. One of the groups was enthusiastic about the possibilities of the new vision and was eager to learn new jobs. Another group, comprised of the more longer-term staff, was skeptical of the changes and had become used to seniority-based job assignments. The Director was both concerned that some staff would refrain from more honest discussion during the retreat and was a bit put off by the resistance he was experiencing. Also, a key manager was about to retire and there were rumors about whether the hire would be based on seniority or skills and who might would get that position.

Consulting Intervention. We began by coaching the Director, helping him make new meaning of the reservations he had about the longer-term staff—how his own ambition and dismissive attitude might even create even more resistance. We sent him a briefing about the role of traditions in organizational change. We followed up with a discussion about his understanding of how longer-term staff might be feeling and why. For example:

What do you think loyalty to the agency means to some of the longer-term staff?

What common practices, proud stories and values are regarded by staff as important?

Which might you wish to reinforce?

For the actual retreat, we wanted to acknowledge the past traditions that add value today, validate present accomplishments and contributions and re-ignite the collective passion for the work ahead. We used a series of generative questions to solicit responses and encourage open interaction. (See, Tools,

Last Line. Generative questions help make explicit the stories people have about themselves and raise awareness of alternative meanings in helping to create a more cohesive team.

(1) The briefing paper was based on the work of Paul Salipante Jr, *Providing Continuity in Change: The Role of Tradition in Long-term Adaptation*. In: *Executive and Organizational Continuity*, Srivastva, Suresh and Fry, Ronald, E. and Associates, 1992, Jossey-Bass Inc.