

YELLOW WOOD NOTES

**An Occasional Publication
for the Benefit of
Our Clients, Colleagues, and Friends**

June 1997

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Redefining the Role of the Consultant

Two aspects of the way we work with our clients distinguish Yellow Wood Associates from many other consulting firms. First, we see our job as not only assisting clients in getting the final product that they really want, but also as transferring skills so that the people with whom we work can develop the capacity to achieve their goals without us in the future. The second distinguishing aspect of our work is the way we view expertise. We see ourselves as co-learners with the client, and value each contract as a way to expand our own skills and expertise.

Our work begins with helping clients examine their assumptions and clarify the key questions they want to answer. Next, we work with clients to design a detailed plan of work that will answer the key questions raised by their reflection. By assisting us in developing and reviewing a detailed plan of work, clients learn how our work is accomplished. They have

an opportunity to take responsibility for specific tasks that draw on their own expertise, and they have the opportunity to learn how to do tasks they may never have attempted in the past.

Once the work plan is in place, clients have a variety of options for getting to their goal. Yellow Wood Associates can serve primarily as coaches or advisors for clients who will do the work themselves.

We can work cooperatively with the client, sharing responsibility for carrying out the plan of work, or we can take primary responsibility for the work but share our own processes and intermediate products with them so that they can better understand what we are doing and why. In each case, we develop relationships that clarify and enhance client capacity so that we produce practical results which clients will be able to build upon once the contract is over.

Yellow Wood's expertise is a product of our experience and the variety of analytical tools we have learned how to use. We value each contract as an opportunity to add value to our own capacity by expanding the base of our experience, knowledge, and

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

tools. We expect and intend to learn something new from each and every contract. Therefore, rather than adopting the posture of experts who know all the answers in advance, we consider ourselves to be co-learners, learning along with our clients more about their own situations and alternative approaches to achieving their goals. As co-learners we recognize that not every path leads to a treasure -- we must learn from the dead ends as well. Our willingness and capacity to learn, and the enthusiasm and energy inherent in the learning process, is the "secret ingredient" that makes each client relationship unique and rewarding.

If this approach to consulting appeals to you, or you would like to learn more about how we can work together on something you care about, please be in touch.

Now We Are Three!

YWA is pleased to announce the addition of Debra Mason to our staff as our second Research Assistant! Ms. Mason has ten years of involvement with rural community planning and development in Vermont. Prior to coming to YWA, she served as Project Coordinator for UVM Extension's Sustainable Rural Development Project in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. She was also a participant in the premier offering of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development's advanced course for community development practitioners, "Skill Building for Stronger Communities," earlier this month.

SUGGESTED READING:

Communities by Choice: Economy~ Ecology~ Equity.

Jeane Gage and Don Harker. Mountain Association for Community Economic Development. (MACED) 1997. To order contact Sarah Belanger, MACED (606)-986-2373 or e-mail to sbelanger@maced.org.

Reinventing Citizenship - The Practice of Public Work.

Center for Democracy and Citizenship. Humphrey Institute. University of Minnesota. 1995. To order contact the Distribution Center, University of Minnesota, (612)-625-8173.

The Study Circle Handbook.

Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC). Topsfield Foundation, Inc. 1993. To order contact SCRC at (860)-928-2616 or e-mail to scrc@neca.com.

A Brief Introduction to Learning Communities

We are all affected every day by rapid changes in the world around us. Our comparative advantage as a species amidst the powerful forces of change in our own lives and in our communities is our capacity to learn continually and to effectively apply what we learn. When we fail to learn we get stuck with conditions that are less than ideal and we have difficulty recognizing alternatives and opportunities for positive change.

Continuous learning is a cyclical process. It involves acting, reflecting on the results of our action, acting again, reflecting again, and so on. Communities that have learned how to learn are creating new processes of public deliberation that help them

mobilize citizens to get what they really want, both individually and collectively. Public deliberation is a process that allows people who hold different views and cherish different values to identify common ground as it relates to the place

in which they live. It is not a short term "feel good" exercise in planning or public involvement; it is an ongoing process supported by such structures as study circles, roundtables, restorative justice programs, and civic journalism that foster issue-oriented discussion of perplexing public issues. The intent of public deliberation is to lead to public action and to empower citizens to be not consumers or advisors, but acknowl-

edged producers of the public goods they care about.

The Aspen Institute's Learning Cluster on Rural Community Capacity Building has identified four behaviors that are necessary, but not sufficient, to establish a learning community. All four behaviors need to occur at both the individual and collective or organizational levels. They are: 1) Instilling a discipline of reflection; 2) Creating new patterns of conversation; 3) Adopting risk and experimentation in action; and 4) Creating new information and new patterns of information flow. These behaviors make most sense in the context of the changing view of reality being brought to us by modern science. We are living at a time when the mechanistic world view of the 17th century, brought to us by

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Descartes and Newton, with its emphasis on objectivity, linear causality, and the possibility of understanding the whole of anything by a thorough examination of its parts, is giving way to the central role of uncertainty, complexity, and systems. We can no longer pretend to control

our world through central planning or top down organization. Instead, we are increasingly recognizing the need to foster self-organization which relies on relationships and creation of a sense of shared purpose among us to succeed.

Reflection, whether individual or collective, allows us to discover what we really care about and what we really want, for ourselves and for our communities. The reason a discipline of reflection is so

Four Behaviors of Learning Individuals & Communities

- Instilling a Discipline of Reflection
- Creating New Patterns of Conversation
- Adopting Risk & Experimentation In Action
- Creating New Information & New Patterns of Information Flow

important is that, without it, energy and focus fade over time, and as our actions become routine, we no longer notice whether they are leading to the intended result. Many of us have had the experience of powerful reflection in a group that then somehow fails to achieve its promise. In our hurried lives it is extremely difficult to foster and maintain a commitment to reflection. Yet regular reflection is critical to learning, focusing, and establishing a sense of shared purpose that allows us to self-organize effectively.

New conversations are equally important. We spend much of our lives talking to people we already know or whom we assume share our basic values and beliefs. This is how we create a sense of community for ourselves. But if we are to move beyond comfortable community into the truly public sphere, we must learn how to listen and speak to those who do not share our values and beliefs. We must learn to deal with conflict constructively, to identify common ground, and to value all the various “communities” and the contributions each can make to the world we would all like to live in. New conversations often reveal surprising information and can lead us to new action that never would have occurred to us otherwise. New conversations can, over time, get us beyond the stereotypes and limited perspectives we all hold about people with whom we disagree.

By adopting risk and experimentation in action, we allow ourselves to increase our learning exponentially. Taking a risk is scary for most people and organizations. Yet, at some level, we all

recognize that if we continue to do what we’ve always done, we will continue to get what we’ve always gotten. If we want something different, we need to be willing to take some risk and experiment to find a better way. Where public deliberation leads to willingness to experiment, learning occurs regardless of whether the experiment succeeds or fails. The more we learn, the more likely we are to succeed the next time.

The reason a discipline of reflection is so important is that, without it, energy and focus fade over time, and as our actions become routine, we no longer notice whether they are leading to the intended result.

Information and feedback is critical to learning. Communities that want to be able to solve their own problems and realize the opportunities available to them need to figure out how to get the information they need to make good decisions. Small rural communities, in particular, have a very limited amount of public information (e.g. Census data) available to them at a scale and within a time frame that is useful for decision making. Part of the process of reflection is determining the type of information needed to make better decisions. Another part is figuring out how, when, and where that information is going to come from

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... if we continue to do what we've always done, we will continue to get what we've always gotten.

and who is going to receive it. This is the process of creating new patterns of information

flow. Information is indeed powerful. Simply knowing how to measure the impact of experimental actions not only gives us something to reflect on, but also allows us to see whether or not we're making progress and how we might change our course of action to be more effective in the future.

All four behaviors -- instilling a discipline of reflection, creating new patterns of conversation, adopting risk and experimentation in action, and creating new information and patterns of information flow -- are necessary (but not sufficient) for creating communities in which people at all levels, individually and collectively, are continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about.

This article is a brief introduction to concepts developed at length in an Emerging Issues paper on Learning Communities recently completed by Ms. Ratner, Principal of YWA, for the Appalachian Regional Commission. YWA is hoping to develop a training program, "Steps to Achieving a Learning Community" within the next year.

THE VERMONTNER'S GUIDE TO COMPUTER LINGO

LOG ON: Makin' the wood stove hotter

LOG OFF: Don't add wood

MONITOR: Keep an eye on the woodstove

DOWNLOAD: Gettin' the firewood off the pickup

MEGA HERTZ: When yer' not careful downloadin'

CHIP: What to munch on

MICRO CHIP: What's left in the bag when the chips are gone

RAM: The hydrolic thingy that makes the woodsplitter work

HARD DRIVE: Gettin' home in mud season

MODEM: What you did to the hay fields

DOT MATRIX: Farmer Matrix's wife

SOFTWARE: Them plastic eatin' utensils

RANDOM ACCESS MEMORY:

You can't remember how much that new rifle costs when your wife asks

LAP TOP: Where the little kids feel comfy

ENTER: C'mon in!

Announcing

YELLOW WOOD ASSOCIATES

WEB SITE:

<http://www.together.net/~yellow>

Please send us your comments and create links to our site from your organization's web site.

UPDATE ON OUR WORK

Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. (YWA) is a consulting firm providing specialized services in rural community and economic development since 1985. YWA's services include rural economic research, market analysis, strategic planning, business planning, and evaluation. YWA provides training programs in community capacity building and how to select and measure appropriate indicators of community progress.

Since January we have been busy conducting trainings and presentations based upon our work in community-based measurement. We continued to train USDA Forest Service Rural Community Assistance staff in Idaho and Oregon, and have been asked to do follow up training in the Southwestern Region this fall.

Shanna Ratner, Principal, was one of 100 people from around the world invited to participate in a World Bank workshop on indicators and methods for measuring participation and local organizational capacity in community driven projects held in January. Ms. Ratner represented the work of the Aspen Institute's Learning Cluster on Rural Community Capacity Building. She shared her experiences in participatory evaluation of the rural Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Communities Program through the Learning Initiative (see below).

Ms. Ratner was invited by The Aspen Institute to present at a forum in May 1997 held to consider how to establish performance measures for USDA Rural Development. She also attended a three day retreat in April to provide assistance to community foundations wishing to enhance their capacity to engage in rural development work. The community foundations represented are involved in a multiyear Ford

Foundation initiative, and include Arizona, Maine, South Carolina, Greater New Orleans, and Kenya, East Africa.

Since 1996, YWA has been working with John Gaventa and Vicki Creed of the Community Partnership Center of the University of Tennessee to develop and deliver training for citizen learning teams and field researchers to enable citizens to monitor the impact of the federal Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program in their communities. Ten of the poorest rural communities in the country who have received EZ/EC

designation have participated in this effort. Participants report tremendous personal growth and increased understanding of and ability to impact their communities as a result of the Learning Initiative. The Initiative continues to engage our energies with a third national cross-site training held in Texas in March and a

written analysis of community benchmark reports.

We are pleased to be working once again with the Plattsburgh-North Country Chamber of Commerce on the first biannual replication of a study of the economic impact of Canada on Clinton County, New York. We developed and implemented the methodology for the original study two years ago. The current study will allow the Chamber to compare 1996 data for economic indicators in eight sectors of the Clinton County economy with the 1994 baseline information.

Our own thinking has been influenced by preparing an Emerging Issues Paper on learning communities for the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). (See the article in this newsletter). This paper, one of a set of emerging issues papers, is designed to assist the ARC in meeting goals established in its strategic plan.

RECENT YWA PUBLICATIONS

"Preliminary Analysis of the Economic Viability of the Essex County Agricultural Fair"
Prepared for Essex County, New York Planning Department. December 1996. \$10.00. May be ordered from YWA. Postage and handling is included in the price.