

In this issue:

- **Civic Social Work for the 21st Century** by *Laura Chasin*
- **Aligning with the Mission: Interview with Neil Sklarew** by *Cynthia Cook*
- **Surprises of Growth: Leader's Blog** by *Nancy Hardaway*
- **Rebuilding in Sierra Leone: Interview with Christiane Frischmuth** by *Cynthia Cook*
- **News from GISC**
- **Coming up at GISC**

Focus on: Building Collaboration

This issue presents a range of examples of bringing people together for common purpose. **Laura Chasin** is founder of the Public Conversations Project, which brings opponents on many important issues together for dialogue and consensus-building. **Neil Sklarew** talks about the evolution of GISC's Board of Directors as an example of creating collaboration. **Christiane Frischmuth** worked in post-civil war Sierra Leone and knows first-hand the challenges of supporting change in a complex society. **Nancy Hardaway** shares her discoveries about leadership as GISC continues to grow.

Our June conference, *"The Future of Managing Change: Building Collaboration in Complex Multi-stakeholder Settings,"* explores this issue further. I hope the articles in this issue give you food for thought, and as always, we look forward to hearing from you.

– *Cynthia Cook, Newsletter Editor*

Civic Social Work for the 21st Century by *Laura Chasin*

Social worker and family therapist Laura Chasin founded the Public Conversations Project (PCP) in 1989. Beginning with groundbreaking dialogues between Boston area Pro-choice and Pro-life leaders in 1994, she and her colleagues have facilitated a number of important dialogues, including retreats with Maine environmentalists, public land managers, scientists and sportsmen's groups; Anglican Bishops from six countries exploring their differences about sexuality; and preparing local trainers to conduct village dialogues among Hutu, Tutsi and Twa people on post-war reconciliation.

The idea that became PCP was triggered by watching a televised debate about abortion. Instead of a constructive debate, I saw shouting heads. I suddenly switched into watching with my clinical eyes and realized that if this conversation were happening in my office, I would know how to interrupt it – as the poor facilitator did not.

I then assembled some family therapy colleagues and asked them to think about what they would do if a conversation like this were taking place in their offices. Together we entertained a galvanizing question: could some of the approaches and methods we used with families in polarized, stuck conflict be adapted to disputes among bigger systems in the public square?

Continued on page 3

Aligning with the Mission: Interview with Neil Sklarew by *Cynthia Cook*

As part of GISC's continued growth as an organization, we have hired Neil Sklarew to consult to our Board. We selected Neil because of both his experience with nonprofit organizations and his Gestalt background. Neil recently facilitated a Board retreat, and I asked him about the challenges our Board has been facing.

CC: What did you identify as the task for the Board at this meeting?

NS: We broke it down into several polarities, several dilemmas this Board had, and addressed each of them in turn during the meeting.



Neil Sklarew

First is the issue of Founder or Board Chair leadership versus distributed leadership. Up until now, Board leadership has been centered in Edwin (Nevis). The rest of the Board has been ready to take assignments, but that's not leadership. Distributed leadership means there are more people who take responsibility for the organization achieving its goals.

The second dilemma is how to move from flexible, adaptable, informal structure to defined and ordered structure. The Board is an organization, and its structure should follow what it is trying to accomplish. Once

Continued on page 2

Surprises of Growth – Complexity of Leadership Leader's Blog by *Nancy Hardaway*

The complexity of the leadership role and the transition of this organization continue to surprise me. Although we have a tiny staff we have a large community with multiple levels of connections. When I stepped into my role last year I believed this was a transition of leadership from the founders to me in the day to day running of the organization. I've held varied leadership roles and I was familiar with GISC. Simple, yes?

We – the GISC Board – have since recognized that there is a greater shift going on. When a position of leadership is created it is usually because the organization itself is experiencing a shift. We are growing from the founder-led, small, organic, intimate community ... but to what? There is also real concern about loss – if we change, what do we lose?

Through our conversations, our Board survey, our Board retreat, and with Neil Sklarew's help, we have realized that we only need to move on the continuum. We can maintain a community based on relationships, and... we can add some structure, which will help us grow in strategic directions and maintain our culture. Structure can support us to accomplish our goals rather than strangle us. We can interact both intimately and strategically, as individuals and as groups within our organization.

Continued here: Leader's Blog

News from GISC

We are thrilled to announce that an extraordinary anonymous donation has paid off the mortgage on the Meeting House. We are now debt-free! We are also deeply touched and appreciative of the confidence in our work that this amazing gift demonstrates. Our fundraising work will now focus on balancing our operating budget and developing a scholarship fund.

In December of 2007, Edwin Nevis, Sonia Nevis and Sean Gaffney participated in a Colloquium and Celebration held by the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. The purpose of the colloquium was to "... compare and contrast the Cycle of Experience and the Sequence of Contacting, how we understand them and use them in our work." The NYIGT also honored Edwin for his contributions to Gestalt.

In January we launched our first leadership development program for leaders of local Cape Cod and Islands nonprofit organizations, in association with the Cape Cod Foundation and with funding from the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation. Fifteen candidates have been accepted into the nine-month program, which covers all facets of leadership in nonprofit organizations, from fundraising and marketing to building effective relationships with Board members, staff and the community.

GISC has received a grant of \$50,000 for faculty member Mel Bucholtz to develop and teach The Tuning Effect®, a new technique using attention, eye movement and breathing to relieve stress and create a feeling of well-being. Mel will be teaching The Tuning Effect® at GISC on April 25 – 27, 2008. For more information, visit our website.

The GISC Board elected Edwin Nevis to another annual term as Board Chair, and Mary Anne Walk was elected as treasurer. For an inside look at the GISC Board's current process, see the interview with Neil Sklarew in this issue.

Rob Farrands and Bridget Farrands will be presenting on "Differentiated Perspectives in Coaching," and Joe Melnick is presenting "Managing Conflict – Introducing the Concept of Contempt" at the ninth annual Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy (AAGT) Conference, being held July 23 – 27, 2008 in Manchester, England. For more information regarding the conference, visit www.aagt.org

Edwin Nevis, Nancy Hardaway & Joe Melnick will be presenting the Cape Cod Model at the OD Network Conference, October 19 – 22, 2008, in Austin, Texas. For more information about the conference, visit: www.odnetwork.org/

Aligning with the Mission

continued from Page 1

the Board agrees upon a strategy and direction, it needs a structure to support the strategy. The Board needs to create subgroups to achieve those goals, and the groups then need leaders. We needed a clearer idea of what we want to accomplish, and Board groups to achieve those goals.

CC: It's exciting how people want to share leadership, and such a change from when the Meeting House opened six years ago, and Edwin, Sonia and I felt like we were it.

NS: And the people are ready to work. Before the meeting we had sent a survey about governance – leadership, funding, marketing – to the Board. We saw in how they identified the challenges facing us a recognition that they want to be involved in governance – which was a surprise to Edwin. It's called the Founder syndrome, where the founder has the desire for others to have more authority, but it is still your instinct to keep control yourself.

Boards are volunteers, and we tend to be careful of how much we ask of people who are volunteering their time. The irony is that they do want to do something meaningful, but we tend to let them off the hook and not push them. We also don't allow them to mess up. Holding on to control is a way to be sure that things are going to get done, but you need to let someone else do them and take the chance that they will make a mistake. What we did in this meeting was get the members of the Board to accept governance responsibilities, and identify the specific areas of responsibility and who is taking on leadership for them.

CC: How is Edwin's role different now?

NS: As Board Chair, Edwin does not have any committee responsibility. His job is to see that the committees do what they are supposed to. The committee leaders are supposed to populate their committees and further define goals. Nancy, as CEO, is responsible for advancing the organization's goals through effective day to day operations. With work being done in committees, Board meetings can be spent hearing reports and making decisions.

Neil goes on to discuss other dilemmas facing our organization, including the struggle to find the level of structure everyone can live with. The rest of this interview is posted on our website:

Aligning with the Mission



Published by:

Gestalt International Study Center
PO Box 515, South Wellfleet, MA 02663 USA
Tel 1-508-349-7900 • Fax 1-508-349-7908
web <http://www.gisc.org>

Nancy Hardaway, President & CEO
(nhardaway@gisc.org)

Cynthia Cook, Newsletter Editor &
Communications Coordinator (cynthia@gisc.org)

Arlene Kirsch, Administrative Manager
(office@gisc.org)

Coming Up at GISC:

April 25 - 27

The Tuning Effect

A new technique to increase confidence and well-being

May 15 - 18

The Next Phase

Learn the steps of making a successful transition

June 16 - 19

Leading Nonprofit Organizations

Increase your influence and strategic effectiveness

June 19 - 22 Conference:

The Future of Managing Change

*Building Collaboration in Complex
Multi-Stakeholder Settings*

July 20 - 24

Executive Personality Dynamics for Coaches

Learn to quickly assess and understand the personality dynamics of your clients

July 24 - 27

The Building Blocks of Creativity

Increase and harness your creative energy

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Civic Social Work

continued from Page 1

We began an action research project in which we videotaped almost twenty groups of four to eight people over the course of a year and a half. We had the advantage of not knowing what we were doing; we didn't know which interventions and which ways of thinking would transfer. And so we developed a stance that has been an earmark of our work ever since. We don't position ourselves as experts but as learners who elicit what the participants know, and we take our cues from them about how we can build on their resources and complement them with ours. We in effect use them as consultants to the process and get their ideas about how best to move the conversation forward.

Everything we do sits on top of three fundamental goals: one, encouraging participants in a face to face interchange to voluntarily restrain their conflict-sustaining patterns of communication and action; second, encouraging deviation from these patterns; and third, promoting new patterns that are more likely to lead the opposing parties to outcomes that they would regard as mutually beneficial.

All our dialogues begin with a "go-round," which, as a structure, builds people's capacity to listen. In a go-round, it is very clear there are three things you can do: You can speak when it is your turn, you can listen, or you can reflect. We often propose a pause between each speaker in which people are asked to reflect on what they've heard, maybe jot down some notes. This blocks the reactive pattern that many of them will have experienced previously, and builds capacity to engage in a different kind of conversation.

Another structural element is the use of ground rules – what I now tend to call communication agreements. Typically these include things like, "Speak for yourself rather than as a representative of a group, Omit rhetorical questions and interruptions, Share air time, etc." They're very behavioral; we don't say, "Treat each other respectfully." That's too vague for us. It's got to be visible or audible. The hardest agreement we often recommend tends to be, "Refrain from

attempts to persuade."

Whatever agreements the participants decide to make, the facilitator asks for and is given the authority to remind people when they forget them. Assuming the role of the guardian of the ground rules and holding everybody accountable for honoring them is a major way the facilitator demonstrates his or her own trustworthiness. Our challenge is to create an environment in which people have enough trust to be willing to lay down their rhetorical weapons and open themselves to an experience that will be really new for everybody.

We frame catalytic questions that invite people to reflect on the complexity of their own views and listen for the complexity of others'. Participants in our early abortion dialogues taught us which questions we needed to ask and what order we needed to ask them in. First, they said, you must ask something about life experiences that will help people understand each other's views about the issue. Second, "What is the heart of the matter for you?" And third, "Within your perspective, are there gray areas, hard cases or conflicts of values that you would be willing to mention?" It's in the answer to that third question that the outlines of shared concerns begin to appear.

Our current civic culture encourages me to take the 360 degrees of you and reduce you down to a single defining degree; like folding up a fan. This costly polarization has caused many of the most compassionate, most thoughtful, most principled and caring people in this country, most of whom are women, to direct huge amounts of time and energy towards fighting each other rather than working together to address the underlying problems that we all care about. PCP's practices are designed to open the fan up again so I can understand why that one percent of you thinks and feels the way it does because I see it in the



Laura Chasin

context of the many more degrees of who you are.

As I appreciate a widened range of who you are and understand the underpinnings of your views, and as you do the same for me, the odds increase that we can identify and explore shared concerns. We might even find a way to do something new together.

For those who get motivated to facilitate bridge building conversations, it's much easier than you might think. It wasn't our fancy, sophisticated clinical skills that mattered, but what I think of as systematic common sense. There is plenty of practical knowledge available about how to bring people together and how to talk across even deep divides.

I am hopeful that people who have systems, process, or bridge building skills will decide to apply them to the public square. We could create a 21st century arm of what you might call "civic social work" – systems thinkers, family therapists and mediators, people who do policy dialogue, people who foster public engagement or consensus building – who can foster community solidarity and resilience in the aftermath of civic disasters or even prevent crises from happening.

The Public Conversations Project offers training, publications and other resources for those interested in this work. Visit: <http://www.publicconversations.org>.



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Rebuilding in Sierra Leone: Interview with Christiane Frischmuth by Cynthia Cook

Christiane Frischmuth is a coach, process consultant and trainer whose background and real passion is international development. She is a Chair of our June conference on "The Future of Managing Change," where she will present work she did in Sierra Leone. I spoke with her about this challenging assignment.

CF: I worked with the government and citizens of Sierra Leone as a change agent. The country had gone through a civil war, so there were broken people, broken processes, broken institutions, and also amazing optimism, the feeling that we won't let this happen again. I was impressed with how they were able to hold onto optimism, even with the raw emotions from the war still right on the surface.

CC: *Speak about building collaboration in this setting.*

CF: People came together quickly at the outset. Very little was known about what would be necessary to build new structures and institutions, so everyone was in a space of learning. We used a process called Rapid Results*, as a way for people to come together and work on concrete projects. The institutions and leaders were all on board with this – learn a process, then apply it.

Also, there was a real valuing and understanding of transparency and involving the beneficiaries in the process, and this was checked, applied and enforced. This was very important for the collaboration. There was a situation where the use of funds was not entirely transparent, and this was flagged by a citizens group and made the national news.

CC: *It sounds like it was crucial to provide structures for the work to happen.*

CF: I was constantly supporting all levels of system – team leaders, coaches, ngos. This could be concretely, by providing structures or offering training or capacity building where needed, and emotionally through building relationships. Being available to confirm that yes, this can really happen. We were constantly reaffirming what worked, and always integrating whatever was new.

CC: *With so many people and organizations involved, how did you know where to focus?*

CF: My job was to support them in this process. How do we bring all these processes and problem-solving needs into a cohesive whole?

I found the Cycle of Experience to be a very useful frame: who is stuck? How does stuckness in one system reflect the rest of the system?

I can also see how important balancing intimacy and strategy was. During the start-up, we had to build relationships and trust, so that they would accept the processes and structures that came later. I find that I am constantly holding this frame, because it is so important and valuable.

CC: *What were some other challenges?*

CF: A key challenge was to keep a sense of newness and accomplishment and moving forward. Cynicism sets in when institutions start seeming like the same old ones. For example, power that had formerly been centralized was shifted to new, decentralized structures – the local councils. I would help the new leaders to not be overwhelmed by their new responsibilities, and work with the centralized structures to



Members of the Single Leg Amputee Sports Club of Sierra Leone

keep them on board with this and make it happen.

We learned it was very important for the councils to be acknowledged for the work they were doing. People were attributing the repair of a bridge to a local businessman, which made us realize that we needed a PR campaign to let the citizens know, this is what your council can do for you.

CC: *So keeping the sense of newness, yet at the same time building ground...*

The history must be held by many actors so that, even when the people in particular roles change, there are still people you can go back to, to understand how we got here.

The government hired coaches to support the local councils in their new role of building infrastructure. The coaches were young men who had been directly impacted by the war. The same coaches are still in place, so they hold the ground and continuity.

CC: *I imagine so many powerful stories...*

CF: At meetings emotions could be very raw – there were tears and eruptions of anger, not towards another person, but from the background they shared. I was told of a meeting where a woman described walking down the street and seeing the man who raped her daughter. As a consultant I wondered, if that happens in this room, what do I do? I was inspired by their ability to put all that suffering aside and move on.

Christiane can be reached at: cfrischmuth@gfconsulting.org

*Rapid Results Approach developed by Robert H. Schaffer and Associates

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