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Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review - Article

What Happens if We Just Talk?

Wednesday, February 24, 2010

by Brian Hayman

“The world we live in and the world we talk about are only tenuously connected.” (Patricia Shaw, “Changing Conversations in Organizations”)

Here’s a story from a friend who sits on a hospital board. A baby is kidnapped from the maternity ward and two days later he (not the baby; my friend) attends a regularly scheduled board meeting where the kidnapping is the one thing on everyone’s mind. But, as it happens, it’s the one thing not on the board’s agenda that evening. It is, however, the only subject on the agenda of the “off-line” board meeting held in the hospital parking lot when the “on-line” meeting adjourns.

OK ... I’ll admit that that one crosses the “tenuously connected” line and moves right on to disconnect. But it’s merely a rather dramatic example of a widespread condition where formal deliberations and official pronouncements about the “state of the union” and the lived experience of organizational members are often spectacularly at odds.

Here’s something a little closer to tenuously connected. I was a member of a management team that went away to develop a strategic plan for our organization. As we entered the hotel room which was to be our home for the next couple of days, we knew the focus was going to be on performance as the room was equipped with props and staging devices that underlined this expectation. There they were: documents deemed relevant to the exercise, flip charts, felt markers and projectors for the inevitable Power Point presentations – you know what I’m talking about. It was show-time!

We began and it wasn’t long before we were locked into definitional disputes over the difference between objectives and goals; strategies and tactics; vision and mission statements. The facilitator knew the difference – that’s why he was getting the big bucks. We didn’t – that’s why we were paying him. While he possessed lexical fluency with the planning model he was using, we, on the other hand, were operating in a mode of functional illiteracy. We did our best but came out of the day feeling that we hadn’t done justice to ourselves or to our business. Apart from the fact that our conversation was being conducted in, as it were, a second language, our organization looked less and less like the one we knew as we attempted to fit it into the planning model with which we were working.

That all changed, however, when we hit the bar at 5 o’clock – it was then we had the conversation about whether or not the business had a future. And this conversation continued through dinner and beyond. Now we were talking in our mother tongue about an enterprise we knew well.

Henry Mintzberg, in “The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning,” nicely captures what I’m getting at here.

Strategies can be rich visions, intricately woven images that can create deep-rooted perspectives. So long as they are articulated in their own terms – which often means images or metaphors rather than concrete labels – ideally by people who know them best (notably their creators), they can maintain that richness. But decomposed and expressed formally, in precise words or, worse, numbers, the rich imagery and intricate interconnections can be lost. The soul of strategy may thus be reduced to a skeleton, much as what happens when a great painting is reduced to its categorical elements – size, colour and texture.

Serious change in strategy generally means a shift in gestalt. On both sides, therefore – in the mind and out – serious change in strategy tends to be associated with discontinuity, the very thing that planning is least able to handle.

Formal meetings with their agendas, rules-of-order and reporting devices are not hospitable to the kinds of conversations needed to produce strategies of the sort Mintzberg is talking about here. Don’t get me

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doubt. There were, after all, no props and no formal agenda in the parking lot where the board talked about the kidnapping and, more importantly, why it wasn't on the agenda. Nor were there any in the bar where my colleagues and I talked about the future of our business. (Well, perhaps the bar had a few more amenities.)

But here's where it can get a little tricky for governing boards. Well, perhaps even more than a little tricky. Transformational conversations, in that they aim at creating new meaning, take us places we've never been before. New meanings, after all, mean something; they have implications. So the question becomes not whether we're capable of having them, but whether we're willing to have them. Here's why.

Every player in a governance system represents some special interest. Members, for example, of representative boards have their constituencies in mind and, to put not too fine a point on it, bring proxies to the table. Organizational members have a particular stake in the enterprise that is often related to matters of power, influence and professional standing. And there can be no greater impediment to transformational conversations than self-interest. "I don't like where this conversation's going because it means that I might have to _____." (Fill in the blank.)

I am, among other things, a jazz pianist. As an improvised art form, jazz is in the business of having transformational conversations which, as I'm certain you've figured out, are improvised events. For jazzers, the uncertainty inherent in improvisation never goes away – we wouldn't want it to because it's the source of everything new, creative and innovative that goes on in the course of a performance. Clearly musicians have to bring their talent to the performance, but there is something more important than mere virtuosity if their shared transformational conversation is to work. This "something more" is captured perfectly for me by the marvellous jazz pianist, Bill Mays. He was once asked what it was like to play a concert, without rehearsal, with musicians he'd never worked with before and he replied by saying, "As long as they're egoless and fearless, it will be fine." Add to that one other thing. The greatest compliment one jazzer can pay another is to say that they have "big ears." When I hire musicians for a gig, these are the ones I hire. If I do that, all that's left for me to do is create a performance space to which they can bring the best of their egoless, fearless and big-eared selves and exercise their collective imaginations.

So, what's left to say? Not much really. I can say that we have all, every one of us, had conversations of the sort I've been talking about here; conversations where we brought the best of ourselves – our intelligence and goodwill; our respect for others and a willingness to listen; our imaginations and curiosity; our courage and compassion – to talk about something that was important to us. As I said before, we're capable of having them, but are we willing to? Oh yes, one more thing – we'll need to check our proxies at the door.

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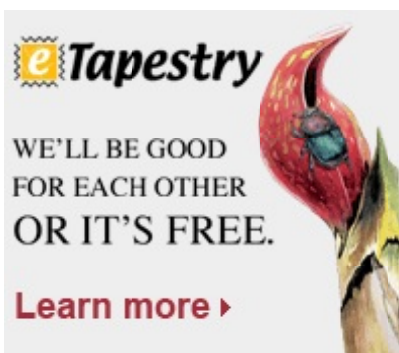
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