

Another Lesson in Letting Go

(Published in The Newsletter of the Open Space Institute (US) Issue 6, October, 2003)

Whatever happens is the only thing that could have. This is the second of the Four Principles of Open Space, and certainly an essential element for a successful session. But for a facilitator, letting go, surrendering the outcome of a workshop while still meeting the client's expectations is not always easy.

I facilitated a workshop for a university client to explore a vision for how education will be conducted in the future. A group of fifty professors, curriculum developers, administrators, and students were brought together for the one-and-a-half day event.

The dean opened the workshop with a short presentation to provide a context. Participants then engaged in small-group discussions to remember the best of the past. A panel of experts presented a variety of new technologies, which was followed by more small-group discussion to share ideas about the application of these technologies to education. By lunchtime, energy among the participants was high.

Following lunch, we all filed into a large room I had prepared in advanced. The dean reiterated the value of everyone's participation. I explained the Four Principles and One Law of Open Space and then reviewed our theme, *How Shall We Create Our Future: University Education 2020 and Beyond*.

There were a few moments of silence, followed by some nervous chatter, after all this was a novel experience for almost everyone in the room. Finally, one intrepid professor stepped forward, grabbed a piece of paper and wrote: "My issue is Keeping (and valuing) the Status Quo."

Okay, this was not what I was expecting. We were supposed to be engaged in a discussion about how to design the educational experience of the future, which implies changing the status quo. I thanked the professor and waited.

A student stepped forward: "My issue is Campus Life & Environments 2020." Then another professor: "My issue is The Impact of Emerging Technologies on the Job Market." Hmm...these topics seemed tangential to our theme. As a former drill instructor, I was tempted to call everyone to attention, recite our theme in unison, and threaten 20 push-ups for everyone if one person veered off course again. But, I refrained and *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have* became my mantra.

More topics were generated, and suddenly the room emptied as participants dashed out to the breakout rooms to find the session of their choice. I took a few deep breaths and went to prowl the halls, lurking at doorways, eavesdropping on the sessions. What I heard surprised me. The conversations were animated and passionate and on track, at least peripherally, with our theme.

The workshop turned out to be a success. We had hoped to get tangible ideas on how education will be conducted in the future, and, in fact, we did touch on that. But, just as importantly, we uncovered concerns that must be addressed so that the university can be successful as it moves forward toward its strategy for the future. Had we not used Open Space and instead generated the discussion topics ourselves, those concerns might not have surfaced. And me? I got another lesson in letting go. *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.*

Patricia Henderson
Principal and Owner
The Inner Path, An Organizational and Training Development Company
yogitrish@mac.com