A Sustainable Co-Creative Organizational Approach

By Manon Gaudreau
Email: manon@ncf.ca
July 20, 2003

Introduction

This approach was developed with the support and inspiration of wise elders, based on values of trust, commitment, cooperation, truth-telling, letting go, respect, compassion, self-responsibility, and listening. The co-creative approach simplifies organizational operation, empowers members, and develops a new sense of community. It is does away with hierarchy and bureaucracy, and depends on shared leadership.

The co-creative organizational approach is based on **Guiding Core Principles** listed in the first section. Commitment to these principles is the foundation of the approach.

The next 2 sections, **Community Activity** and **Organizational Operation**, explain how the approach works.

The practicalities of the approach are then described under 3 headings, **Organizational Structure**, Bridging Legal Requirements and **Operational Guidelines**.

Maturity and wisdom are essential elements of this co-creative approach. The approach is a container, and the quality of the results depends on the quality of the ingredients: commitment to Guiding Core Principles, self-knowledge, ability to let go of self-interest and serve the Collectivity, and interpersonal and social skills. It is therefore appropriate to define a selection process for the membership and to identify resources for personal development.

The Addendum provides suggestions for a list of **Personal Qualities and Abilities** and references for Group Processes and Personal Development.

Guiding Core Principles

Trusting in Spirit and inner guidance

Committing to co-creation, partnership and shared leadership

Acting with integrity, in service to the community

Speaking our truth as a foundation for connectedness

Opening to organic growth and change

Reaching agreements rather than operating by rules

Building community by linking rather than by ranking in hierarchy

Creating openness through trusting and letting go of controlling

Welcoming diversity and honoring each person's unique contribution

Creating the space to help everyone be empowered

Letting enthusiasm emerge

Listening to what wants to be born

Risking and learning from mistakes

Community Activity

Within a community, or a network of communities, activities represent the collective energy, that is, the sum of individual member's energy, interest and passion. If someone has energy to do something, it happens. If not, it does not happen. When many members share a passion, not necessarily all members, then a community activity is co-created. Diversity is honored.

However, if one person alone makes something happen, this is not called a community activity. It is a personal initiative serving the interest of that individual. That is so even though that initiative is driven by a desire to serve the community. If the community did not express a collective need for, and did not allocate collective energy to the happening of an initiative, then no one can claim that the initiative is serving the community. It is serving an individual who is not letting go of self-interest and wants to control a situation.

No so-called community activity should be created or sustained as a result of a single person's effort or sacrifice. If a community chore needs to be done, it is brought to the community to be shared, not delegated to a few doers, nor performed by a savior. However, the community may choose to hire someone to perform the service. The choice comes from the community and not from the doer. If the choice comes from the doer then it is serving self-interest.

Organizational Operation

In a hierarchical approach, decisions are made by a Board of Directors or a Steering Committee. Decisions are then executed by an Executive Committee. Subcommittees reporting to the former bodies may either act as counselors or doers. Members of these bodies are either elected or appointed by another administrative body. Ordinary members of the organization have voting power at the Annual General Meeting. Voting ability can only be exercised when a meeting has a Quorum, that is, when the number of attendees is considered to represent the majority of voters.

In the co-creative approach described herein, there is no hierarchy, no election, no authority making decisions for others, no one reporting to administrators, no voting procedure, no bureaucracy.

The operation of the organization's activities is based on a co-creative process where all members are in partnership. All partners share the leadership. There is no one in charge. No decision is made by a small group of people.

The operational element in this model is called a **Circle**.

A Circle is a working team. The name Circle reflects the fact that when the team meets, team members sit around in a circle, all members being considered equal. There is no one sitting up front, acting as the person in charge of the team. Facilitation of the meeting is rotated among the members. The facilitator is not acting as a leader but is being in service to the team. In some instances, an external facilitator may be invited.

A minimum of 3 people is required for a given Circle to exist. Circles operate by reaching agreements by consensus rather than by making decisions based on the majority rule. A maximum size may be set for the number of committed

participants within a Circle. However, each meeting is open to all members of the organization.

While some functions may be the same as those defined in a hierarchical approach, the difference is in the relationship between people. Roles within the organization are chosen by a self-selection process. Volunteers commit to a given function or to participating to a given Circle for a given period of time, with the agreement of the other members.

Although self-selection implies that individuals volunteer themselves to become a committed member of a Circle, or to perform a given function within the Circle, all members are involved in reaching an agreement on the result of the selection process.

The organization may involve several different Circles with different roles. All Circles are considered equal. No Circle reports to another one. All Circles interact in partnership with all other Circles as necessary.

Organizational Structure

Circle of Members: All members of an organization are invited to attend a yearly Circle of Members. This is similar to an Annual General Meeting. The Circle of Members is responsible for the formal process of self-selection for the members of the Council. The Circle of Members is also an opportunity for acknowledgments, for an exchange of information, for getting perspective on the global operation, vision and mission of the whole organization, for celebrating the spirit of community.

Council: A minimum of 3 volunteers are required to form the Council, otherwise, the organization is not created or ceases to exist. Up to 8 members is a good size for the Council. The function of the Council is to manage the practical operations of the organization. It has the same status as any other Circle. The Council is a team with a different function but is not in charge of other Circles.

The Council performs the basic administrative functions of the organization. Within the Council, participants self-select their functions, including Treasurer, Secretary and Spokesperson/President if necessary. Participants of the Council

commit to attending a monthly meeting. Meetings last an hour or 2, valuing meeting time and minimizing energy expended in meetings. Whatever gets done within that time frame gets done. Whatever does not get done doesn't. No attachment to the results. However, if the Council has the enthusiasm and energy to meet more often or for longer periods, it may, as long as it does not become a sacrifice.

Other Circles: Other circles may come and go as passion arises and dies. They grow in numbers and size as enthusiasm emerges organically from the community. A Circle may be created to organize and sustain a given activity, a given project, a given service to members, a given management function, or to provide decentralization for another Circle.

These other Circles sprout from (or are mothered by) the Council. To form a new Circle, a proposal is presented to the Council to reach an agreement on the proposed project. At least 3 people must be involved in presenting their project, and committing to carry it through. A Circle then functions as an autonomous entity, as long as it applies the Guiding Core Principles and works in cooperation with other members in the organization. A representative of the Circle may occasionally need to participate in a Council meeting to share information or make some requests like budget allocation. If at any point, the number of committed participants in a Circle drops below 3, the Circle stops operating.

The sum of the energy bubbling within an organization gives it its vitality, and may vary over time. Activities may be created spontaneously as passion is manifested into action.

Bridging Legal Requirements

If the organization is a Corporation with legal requirements, the legal functions must be clearly defined so that the legal requirements are met without compromising the co-creative approach.

Within the Council, 3 people are self-selected to perform the legal functions of Treasurer, Secretary and President. These people share the responsibility for managing the money, signing contracts, filing income tax reports, producing and safekeeping legal records, organizing and documenting the Annual General Meeting (AGM).

Part of the Circle of Members gathering needs to be set aside for conducting the AGM. The AGM is a formality and not an actual framework for conducting business. The process of reaching agreements belongs to the Circle of Members. The information and decisions are then transposed into a format that meets the minimum legal requirements.

Operational Guidelines

Although there may be someone committed to the function of President within the Council, that person is not the head of the organization but rather a representative who can speak on behalf of the organization. A better name may be Public Relations Agent or Spokesperson.

Other members of the Council may play the role of Liaison with other organizations or with the other Circles within the organization.

Elders bring wisdom and role modeling of skills to the Council.
Facilitation of meetings is rotated among the members of a Circle. The facilitator is selected at a previous meeting, so he or she may collects items that need attention from any members of the organization, prior to the meeting. Issues may also be raised at the meeting itself by anyone attending the meeting.

Sitting in a circle makes everyone feel included and promotes good communication.

The meeting begins and ends with a Centering Ritual led by the facilitator. During the meeting, any member may ask for a re-centering if the discussion is being unproductive. It is a good practice to select one person to play the role of "are we centered and grounded in our Core Principle?".

In case of unresolved conflict within the Circle, it is recommended to call on an outside trained facilitator.
If a committed member of the Council is unavailable for a while, another person would be invited to fulfill the member's function. During the year, responsibilities within the Council could rotate among its members.

If the Council feels overloaded with too much to deal with, it needs to consider some form of decentralization by birthing another Circle, remembering that this is not delegation, but defining another autonomous function. If extra resources are not available (in the form of other people forming a new Circle), then the Council must accept downsizing its activity level. Burning out volunteers is not worth any cause.

The same guidelines stated for the Council applies to other Circles of the organization.

Meetings do not always happen face to face. Some meetings may be done over the phone (teleconferencing) or over Internet. Protocols to hold Internet meetings or to communicate on an ongoing basis may need to be established to avoid information overload, to maintain a good team connection, and productive discussions and fertile reaching-of-agreements.

Conclusion

The co-creative approach described herein has been applied successfully for many years by one organization. Its members had a common spiritual background.

Having a spiritual background is an asset. However, people with various spiritual backgrounds can come together if they are able to transcend their respective background in forming a collectivity. Their individual strength, grounded in their spiritual values and practices, will enrich the collectivity.

The collectivity needs to define and practice its own rituals to sustain itself, beyond the application of an organizational structure and decision-making process and beyond individual spiritual practices. These collective rituals will acknowledge the talents and contributions of its own members and celebrate the spirit of community.

Addendum 1 — Personal Qualities and Abilities

We are all interconnected. When we all share our talents, we enrich our life. We enrich our individual life and our collective life. Conversely, when we put our inabilities and misfortunes in common, we contribute to our mediocrity: our individual mediocrity and our collective mediocrity.

Being together compounds our power: our power to enrich our life or make it miserable.

Marianne Williamson wrote: "Our power lies in our clarity about the role our work can play in the creation of a more beautiful world".

A collectivity benefits from the skills and abilities of its members. Some of them are listed here. The individual and the collectivity share the responsibility of developing these skills: Each individual committing to its own growth and all members of the collectivity supporting the development of each other.

Self-awareness: knowing what serves you and what does not, your strengths and weaknesses, your talents, your values
Self-observation: being your own witness
Self regulation: managing your own emotions
Self-love, self-acceptance, forgiveness: it is OK not to be perfect, it is OK to make mistakes
Taking in criticism
Self-confidence, self-motivation
Self-responsibility: keeping in balance, healthy and happy, fulfilling your own physical, affective, spiritual needs; being responsible for your actions or your passivity
Intimacy: with yourself and others
Ability to live alone and feel complete by yourself
Ability to give and receive
Letting go of self-interest in serving the Collectivity
Surrendering to what is
Creativity
Commitment: your participation is your choice; reevaluate and re-choose your commitment each day
Communication with integrity, tell your truth; say what your mean, mean what you say; express your opinions, wants, desires, emotions
Respecting differences of opinions, wants, desires, emotions

Compassion for yourself and others
Presence: being in the moment
Listening to others with respect
Empathy: identify emotions in others
Appreciation for your contributions and taking responsibility for getting acknowledged
Expressing appreciation to others
Looking for unresolved issues within yourself that create a reaction to the behavior of others
Maintaining harmony with others: taking time to establish rapport and resolve conflicts
Resolving problems constructively: offering solutions when presenting a problem
Learning from experiences: do what works and discontinue doing what does not work
Being a selfless leader
Creating joy, beauty and peace in your life and in your relationships

Conversely it may be advisable to screen for behaviors such as:

Egocentric personality
Manipulation
Compulsions
Addictions
Helpless victims
Compulsive consumers
Dependency
Hermits
Abusiveness
Defensiveness

Some people are attracted to community to compensate for their relational or social inabilities. These individuals would be better served by seeking professional help and engaging in self-development workshops and support groups.

Addendum 2 — Group Processes and Personal Development

Meeting or group processes:

Dynamic Facilitation and The Choice Creating Process
http://www.tobe.net/topics/facilitation.html

Comparison of Rules of Order, Consensus and Dynamic Facilitation
http://www.co-intelligence.org/I-comparisonRR-CC-DF.html

Consensus Builds Emotional Acceptance, by Hugh Perry
http://www.celebratingcommunity.ca/HTMLpages/consensus.html

The Rings of Empowerment and The Co-Creator's Agreements
http://www.victoriacsa.com/programs/rings-of-empowerment.htm

Personal development:
North *Star* — Developing "A Life You Love" Strategy, by Larry R. Christensen
larry.christensen@slcc.edu Phone 1-801-957-4392 Fax 1-801-957-6609

Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, Massachusetts USA http://www.kripalu.org/

Return to Articles page: www.celebratingcommunity.ca/Articles.html