

Global Flipchart “Member of the Month”

May 2008

My name is Sylvie Lapointe and I am an internal organizational development consultant for Natural Resources Canada, a department of the Canadian Federal Government. I live in Ottawa, (in the province of Ontario) the capital of Canada. Ottawa is a government town and a university town: people come and go. I am one of those rare individuals who have lived here all her life.

I have a passion for helping individuals grow and thrive as they make meaningful contributions to their community. I come from a family of teachers and inherited a deep desire to facilitate learning.

My story:

Over the course of my career, I have worked for all levels of government: city, municipal, provincial and federal. I have been a federal public servant for the last eleven years. I have a background in psychology, sociology and psycho-therapy and I started my career as a social worker with a heavy caseload of welfare recipients and post-psychiatric patients. I felt ineffective: my clients never seemed to manage to get off that merry go round of poverty and illness. I was frustrated with the system which was so difficult to navigate for my clients.

My focus then shifted from the individuals who needed help to the community in which they lived in. I figured that maybe I could better serve the needs of individuals if I could help change the system they worked and lived in. That brought me to the world of community development where I worked in the areas of health promotion: heart health, sexual health and tobacco use cessation.

The latter was the reason why I was recruited into the federal government. You can imagine that for a grassroots “heart on the sleeve” kind of person like me, adjusting to the stifling bureaucracy of government was quite a culture shock.

I got into facilitation via a backdoor. I led week long courses on leadership development for managers. We covered things like personality type, situational leadership, coaching, communication skills, creative problem solving, etc. People would leave on the Friday feeling elated and full of resolve to make some changes in their professional lives but... after a few weeks back at their desk, they would succumb to the pressures of conforming to the organizational culture of “I am so very busy” and “constant fire extinguishing” waving the white flag. They had learned all sorts of new skills but there had not been any *real learning* because it did not result in behavior change.

Some of those managers asked me to come teach their staff this “leadership stuff”. We reasoned that perhaps, if a team of people learned the same leadership skills and spoke the same language they could start making a difference in the system. That training led to requests for facilitation. Managers were asking for my help to put in practice what they learned. They wanted help to tap into the experience and strategic intelligence of their staff and stakeholders and gain their commitment to deliver on the business imperatives.

That was the beginning of my love affair with facilitation. I became a Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) with the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) in November 2001. I became an assessor for the CPF program in June 2002.

What I do:

The more I interacted with my clients, the more I became fascinated with the dynamic between individuals and their organizations. How can individuals influence the system? Change the culture? How does the system adapt to the changing times or, to the changing needs of its people and clients? How can humanity happily cohabitate with the fast paced and sometimes impersonal world of business transactions?

So how do we build internal capacity for change within an organization? Fast forward to today. Our answer was to form a Community of Practice of over 90 Natural Resources Canada employees who were trained in the tools and practices of a Learning Organization, facilitation and coaching. Volunteers had to apply for the training and explain why they thought they could be a leader of change within their organization.

It was very important that the whole system was engaged so we made sure that we had representation from support staff all the way through management. We recruited policy wonks, research scientists and program delivery professionals. We wanted folks to feel supported and have the opportunity to learn from each other so we established small teams of practitioners in each centre across Canada from east to west and north to south.

The first group of thirty graduated from the training in February 2007, the second in October 2007 and the last group in November 2007. Since then, our practitioners have designed and facilitated over fifty events reaching thousands of people. The feedback from both clients and management is extremely positive. But more importantly, the feedback from our practitioners is heart warming. Many have said that becoming a learning organization practitioner has given them new wings in the workplace. They feel valued and appreciated. They know they are making a difference. Is it not what we all want to do? To make a difference.

A facilitation experience:

I was asked as part of this article to share with you a recent facilitation experience. I was struggling with this: which one do I choose? It has got to be pretty special to be featured in an article like this? Have I done anything that is worth writing about? What will people think?

Just at that moment someone knocked on my door. His name is Rodrigo. He just came back from a month long trip to South America. I had asked him to bring me back a rock from the place he visited that struck him the most. Rodrigo brought me a rock from Torres Del Paine in the South of Chile. His eyes shone as he described how awe struck he was with those monuments of nature.

He took part in a two-day session that I led for his team last July and since then I have been invited to work with his group on several occasions. Our deputy minister launched a department wide initiative to create more horizontality and collaboration amongst the sectors so that we are better positioned to strategically inform and influence the natural resources agenda. An Implementation Task Group was assembled bringing together some bright minds from all the different sectors. Their job was to develop a new policy framework for the department in just six months. It has been a roller coaster ride for these guys. They have spent long days and nights developing this new framework and now, as they are moving forward towards implementation, they are facing strong resistance from the culture they have been asked to change. Rodrigo shared with me that the work I did with them had a significant impact on their work as a team.

What did I do you ask? I spent time helping them develop relationships. I learned something precious from a friend and colleague who is a professional coach, Paul Lefebvre. There are three types of conversations: a conversation for relationship, a conversation for possibilities and a conversation for action. I don't know about the organization you work with but in mine, we spend the vast majority of our time in action. We run from one fire to the next with little or no time to ask ourselves if there are better ways to snuff out fires or, even better still, to reflect on what causes the fires in the first place and how to prevent them! So the theory goes something like this: if you do not take time to build relationships, there may not be strong commitment towards your action and if you do not take time to look at new possibilities, your actions may be lacking imagination and creativity.

I designed an agenda that followed those three levels of conversation. The first day focused on *relationships*. I led team members through a personality type inventory exercise. Participants got some insight into what "made them tick" and discovered how their skills and talents could complement those of their colleagues.

We then opened the conversation towards *possibilities*. I taught them a tool called Appreciative Inquiry (by David Cooperrider) and asked them to interview each other. Participants were asked to tell a personal story about a time when they felt truly engaged and especially proud of what they had accomplished as part of a team. The positive attributes that emerged from those stories became the basis for the team's vision and values statement.

Finally, we moved into *action*. I used an Interview Matrix process to develop a team charter. Every member of the team had an opportunity to give some input into what should be the team's ground rules, protocols, decision making process and conflict resolution process. We finished the session with a "Next Steps" piece. I asked the question: "What do we need to do when we go back to the office in order to keep the momentum going?" We listed actions along with names and timelines. We closed the session by doing a "check-out" which gave every one the opportunity to share with others what he or she was taking away from these first two days with their new team.

This team was under a lot of pressure to produce a key document and propose a new approach to doing business in a very short time frame. I believe that the time the leaders chose to invest in building relationships at the start of this project allowed them to navigate the sometimes choppy waters of team work. The vision and values statement and the Team Charter became a compass when the weather got rough and the drive to get things done overshadowed the human element of team work. The work we did in that two day session last July helped a group of strangers become a team through open communication. Trust was built as they learned about each other, defined what they stood for and how they wanted to work together to accomplish their vision.

If I could share one thing...

If I have learned one thing it is that we need to go back to basics: facilitate the building of relationships between people.

I have traveled a very winding road throughout my career – never sure where the next turn would take me. It is odd that in many ways I feel like I have come full circle to where I started. Change begins with the individual. People need to have a voice, to be heard and to be thanked for their unique contributions. Once they are truly "seen" they start to believe that they can make a difference and magically... they do!

No matter how you look at it, an organization is simply a group of individuals working towards a common goal. An organization is only as strong as its employees and the relationships existing between employees.

We, as facilitators, can create the conditions for people to flourish and grow in their organizations. I like to think of it as building a bridge from the head to the heart of an organization through its people. If we succeed in doing this, then anything is possible!

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has" - Margaret Mead