

Cross-Cultural Integration: Mobilizing the Grass Roots

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They were skeptical about the feasibility. They certainly didn't expect such a positive reaction from so many quarters.

When the leadership of Children's International Summer Villages (CISV) determined they needed a new strategic plan, they knew they needed to engage the grassroots. Yet developing a shared, cohesive direction involving 60 nations with almost as many languages seemed impossible. Even more challenging, many nations would not attend the annual conference because it was in Israel.

CISV, a not-for-profit organization, develops cross-cultural understanding in children and youth from around the world through peace education. By respecting cultural differences and developing self-awareness, participants incorporate these values into their daily lives. This cross-cultural emphasis required a different approach to Strategic Planning. "We needed to build our direction from the local level up, not from international down", espoused Cathy Knoop, President of CISV International. Intuitively she understood everyone needed to be involved, yet had concerns about making it happen.

Gill Uy, one of the leadership team, approached me, knowing that we helped clients break down silos. "We need a simple process that won't get distorted as it is interpreted and translated", cautioned Gill. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was perfect for collecting basic information and rekindling grassroots passion, engaging commitment to implement at the outset. It was also a practical way to involve many countries with many languages. Open Space (OS) for design married passion and responsibility, inviting people to implement their ideas. In addition, people would experience working productively as a whole, something often prevented by CISV's geographical challenges. Since bridging boundaries to create cross-cultural understanding is CISV's focus, Open Space was ideal for living their philosophy. And lastly, because many countries and participants could not attend a meeting in Israel, we offered online participation for creating and commenting on reports and setting priorities.

The planning meetings were 6am telephone calls accommodating times in Israel, England, Italy, the US and Canada. Skepticism is too mild a word to describe the reaction to AI and OS. Imagine busy, pragmatic people, many having English as a second language, understanding how telling stories would provide direction for a global organization. Even harder, explaining 150 people from 60 countries meeting with no agenda. Gill and Cathy, both professional educators, helped others understand that simply telling stories generated enthusiasm and commitment for implementation. Eventually, people's own stories provided comfort that it would work. Many early morning discussions developed this six month process:

1. Each country received a handbook explaining AI and the overall process. It contained a briefing on the process, templates for coordination, interview guidelines, interview questions, and outlines to consolidate results.
2. Each country enlisted chapter coordinators. Every chapter conducted interviews. Interviewers then met following a common process to synthesize the values and wishes from the interviews. They documented two stories that captured the essence of the emerging values and wishes. This process was repeated at a National level. This story is an example:

"On day 12 at the 2000 "Peaces of Respect" Summer Camp, a Nazi swastika was drawn on the bedroom wall housing two German and one Israeli boy. Everyone was upset, the whole camp affected, with people wanting to punish the person responsible. The German boys said they did not do it yet were being blamed.

Staff started discussions with the Israeli and German delegations. Deep-rooted feelings and personal turmoil were present. With little progress, staff felt a need to change the environment. They took the two delegations to an ice cream store for a frank and open discussion.

The delegates talked a long time. Feelings came out and people listened. The topic turned to how the experience was affecting the whole community. The delegations decided to have a children's parliament to express feelings about this experience. Through this powerful process, healing began.

People talked about what the swastika meant for them and their family. Not all spoke; some cried while speaking. An Israeli boy said that his grandfather died in a concentration camp. His father often told him the story. He always remembered his grandfather in his heart; it was difficult to hear about Germany and the Nazis. One German boy said that it hurt him, too; that what was done was terrible but he had nothing to do with it and wanted to be accepted for himself.

When the conversation ended, people began to hug each other. Other delegates told the Israelis and Germans how much it meant to hear these stories; that they felt what the Holocaust meant to real people's families, and saw healing in front of them. This event, from discordant beginning to triumphant ending, will remain a striking image in the lives of everyone in this Camp."

3. An international coordinator synthesized the results of the several thousand interviews into a *storybook* with a summary of *values* – such as cross-cultural understanding, personal development, friendship, respect – and *wishes* – more and different programs, availability to a wider cross-section of people in more countries, a stronger commitment base in some places.



4. This book became the foundation for the first two half day sessions of the AI Summit in Israel. A world wide cross section of 30 youth, adults and leaders immersed themselves in the data. Participants told their own stories and peak experiences. Surprise and awe filled the room as people identified with each other's stories. Many were in tears as they relived experiences of deep personal meaning. Alvaro from Costa Rica put it this way "The hairs on my neck and arms stood on end as I heard each person's story. It's amazing how CISV affects all of us in much the same way." After telling their own stories, participants reviewed all of the stories, values and wishes, discussing them in small groups and developed skits, pictures and songs. They translated these into provocative propositions (PPs) reflecting the values and wishes from around the world. The PPs defined a tangible goal for CISV.



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6. A specific goal statement, developed from the propositions became the Open Space theme. I find that a statement regarding moving from planning to action, or making the propositions a reality is not sufficient. A concrete objective that encapsulates the essence of the provocative propositions provides a measurable target shifting the nature and quality of the OS topics. It shifts people from general, conceptual discussions to concrete ideas about achieving tangible goals. CISV's theme: "By 2009, become a larger network of strong National Associations in every continent."
6. The one day Open Space included 150 participants from around the world. More participated online, posting and commenting on reports. Because of the wide variety of languages, we provided three days to read and understand the reports. Then participants connected it all. We put the OS theme on the floor with the provocative propositions around it. Small groups related the OS reports to the PPs, ensuring everyone understood the process, the implications of each report and how it tied to the overall vision before voting. Everyone, including online participants, voted on the top priorities for CISV. They also identified where they were willing to initiate moving the organization forward.
7. Finally, the leadership team processed the results, determining the implications for committee work.

Participants were universally thrilled, saying "This process aligns with the way people from Asia-Pacific think and work;," "I have never seen such universally positive reaction to a process; even people who are traditionally negative liked it;," "This feels like CISV", "It was nice to see people from different countries and different ages so excited and working together so well", "We need to do more of this."

A delighted CISV is implementing the plan. Formal committees and structures are changing to address top priorities. An implementation toolkit for National Associations is in the works to help each Nation implement the priorities. Next year's annual meeting will discuss progress towards the plan. Youth will be trained in AI and OS to support local chapters and regions strengthen their organizations. Countries with multiple chapters are investigating incorporating these types of processes when rolling out the strategic plan.

It is a testament to Open Space and Appreciative Inquiry that an organization specializing in cross-cultural integration found such value and insight from them. For me, the power in combining AI and OS comes because both use intuition, energy, and insights from the organization. AI builds energy and momentum from the outset, creating ownership and anticipation regarding new direction. It creates action long before any formal results are realized. Using Open Space for the design builds on this personal initiative. It focuses on the energy rather than the activities of the people affected, providing opportunity to contribute where there is natural interest, releasing a huge reservoir of untapped energy. It eliminates selling and orchestrating a pre-planned process instead unleashing pride and ownership that delivers results.

For my "Tips and Techniques on Integrating Open Space and AI", e-mail me at sking@starfield.ca.