

Unicef in the Former Yugoslavia: Annual Retreat

Carla Vliex, cvl@tg.nl

I had the honor of facilitating the annual retreat of Unicef in the Former Yugoslavia. Here is my story:

Once each year, Unicef staff comes together for their (more or less obligatory) annual retreat. In Serbia /Montenegro, with staff spread across the country, a really active steering committee defined several plans and they wanted them all!! They wanted to:

- plan for next year, as concretely and specifically as possible since everyone meets only at their annual retreat
- work with “Belbin team roles”, introduced by two staff members who attended a training with writer/consultant Meridith Belbin at UN Headquarters in New York
- improve communication, engaging the whole group to resolve differences between local and international staff

Meeting at a ski resort, were about 40 Serbia and Montenegro staff, 65% from Serbia and 35% from Montenegro. Several international staff who lived and worked in the area also attended. Sixty to seventy per cent of the people worked on programs, the rest were technicians, drivers, and administrators.

We wanted a framework to tie the plans together. I thought if these are their most important issues they must be connected. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provided the framework for the conference. Not the methodology but the philosophy of AI guided our work.

The conference design the sponsor suggested was:

Day 1 Work with Belbin team roles

Day 2 Present last year’s results in the morning

Open Space (OS) for just for the afternoon on day 2!!!

Day 3 Define the programs, projects and objectives for the coming year

Quite a few e-mails and telephone calls later, the program became:

Day 1 Open Space to do the work that needed doing (and it was a lot)

Day 2 Belbin team roles

Day 3 OS action planning in the morning

More Belbin to close the annual retreat.

I was very, very worried about this program. But ... we all were.... !!!! Adding to our worry was the tension between the international staff and some local staff. After sleeping on it, after lots of beautiful and rich discussion with the sponsors – three Unicef people

and me – and feeling as if we were constantly in Open Space as we planned for the whole, we designed the flow:

Day 1 Discovery

We asked participants to stand in a row, with the longest period of service in front to shortest service last in the row. We divided them according to their period of service into groups of five and asked for their loveliest, funniest, best, greatest story. After some time we had a plenary and each group shared a story. It was great fun.

We took this approach because we didn't feel we had enough time for interviews since people met just once a year. And there was such urgency to work with the whole group.

We went on with Dream using Open Space. We envisioned the OS on "Unicef's future role in Yugoslavia" enabling real communication among the diverse staff. Some had read about Open Space, so people were very serious and very quick in posting items. The chaos at the bulletin board was enormous, the biggest I had ever seen. It was very hard for me not to interfere as people asked me over and over again to do some clustering. I invited them to do it themselves and after a while things had their own way, as it always goes in Open Space.



There were two sessions before lunch. During lunch, some people were still confused about the chaos, no pre-determined objectives and so on. There were more and more questions about the origins of Open Space. We, the steering committee, announced a meeting after lunch for people who wanted to hear more about Open Space. I told the story of Open Space's origins – from a conference Harrison Owen spent a year planning, only to be told, "what a great conference...and the best parts were the coffee breaks!" I mentioned the joy of coffee breaks and the spirit of being in a circle. It was just two minutes, but it was good.

That afternoon, I returned from a stroll to find everybody gone!!!! I went to the bulletin board and the schedules had changed. People went skiing, some played cards in the pub,

some were swimming. They really liked the butterfly role. Though I was upset, I let it go. I came back later and everybody was working; and they worked very hard until nearly eight o'clock that evening!!!

Day 2 Design

And...nobody wanted to follow the program the next day; they wanted to stay in Open Space. After discussing it, the sponsor said that the work needed to be done in two groups with everybody present. I told them that Open Space is not just a methodology but a way of being, acting or living. And they did it. They worked all day very hard, without butterflies and bumblebees yet the spirit of OS was still there. It was amazing.

There were some complaints that people felt ignored or isolated. We found that this was mostly during the social events so we made a bulletin board of social events with just a few rules: sign up means show up and bumblebees and butterflies are welcome.

Day 3 Doing/desiring

Participants read the reports and I re-opened Space. Again, they were very quick. There were two 45-minute time slots for action planning. Some beautiful things emerged, including making offices more child friendly and democratizing leadership within Unicef and within Yugoslavia.

The closing circle was odd, a couple of people were very emotional and quite a few local men were very uncomfortable. When I said it was over, nobody moved!!! It was just not over and I didn't know what to do. ... The sponsor helped by announcing that lunch would be served in ten minutes...

In the afternoon we worked on Belbin for one hour and then... really self organized, there were local musicians and local wine/spirits and then, after singing and drinking it was over.....

Outcomes

- Action plans for the next 1.5 years included working on sustainability and office accommodations with room for children
- Trends and visions for the next three years imagined new programs involving the local and national government
- Diminishing the differences not only between the local and international staff but also between the men and the women began.

Reflections

The AI framework kept the bits and pieces together. Everyone knew what was going on, what issue was being worked, and what would come next. As a result of the Open Space, something happened. On the last day, when I said that we could work with the issues keeping the spirit, the law and the principles of Open Space in mind, it worked incredibly well. (I have done this with other clients, keeping the spirit, law and principles without the agenda setting and the marketing place. It seems to work on the communication level.)

The combination of AI and OS, as we used it, works with a whole group when time is limited. AI structured the different conference goals and OS provided a way of meeting, speaking and being together. I was very worried about the mixing of Open Space, teamwork (Belbin) and headquarters' requirements for annual planning. But the ideas and intentions of AI enabled people to see the connection. Still, I think I would have the same hesitation next time I chose to use neither AI nor OS in the 'purest' way. I think every time you combine processes, you need to think it over and over. And help from the steering committee and the area manager is essential!