



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

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How Do You Change The World?

BY SUSAN FLEETWOOD and WILLIAM SPARKS

Seriously, how do you change the world?

One community at a time.

Alumni of the Master of Science in Organization Development (MSOD) program created a powerful and engaging un-conference design for their last alumni event. When you think of a conference, what comes to mind? You're probably thinking about a keynote speaker, some breakout sessions and a few networking events. As leaders in change management, we decided to use our skills to create a new conference that would break us out of this routine. We weren't seeking an over-the-top production to dazzle attendees. Instead, we desired to create an inviting space for members of the alumni community to gather, learn and share, be real... and be accepted.

And, with that, we had the first and fundamental shift in the foundation of our thinking: we're not designing a conference, we're building a community. John McKnight and Peter Block, co-authors of *Abundant Community*, define community as "a place where gifts are recognized and shared with one another." To help us stay focused on this vision, we defined six design principles that we affectionately refer to as "keepsakes."

- **KEEP IT SIMPLE**
- **KEEP IT SMALL**
- **KEEP IT ALIVE**
- **KEEP IT CLOSE**
- **KEEP IT OPEN**
- **KEEP IT GOING**

MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE

Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business and Management has taught the MSOD program for thirty years. In 1994, alumni organized and funded the first reunion of graduates from the program. This reunion evolved into a bi-annual conference, complete with the usual keynote speakers, breakout sessions and intense networking. All alumni conferences were held in the Southern California region, near the university and the largest cluster of alumni.

For the 2011 conference, we embraced a theme of citizenship and community, asking the question: How can we use our skills to improve the communities in which we live and work? If we are going to truly change the world, we have to start with where we live and where we belong. Our conference would not only provide information and resources for our attendees, but model the very essence of community in the delivery of the conference itself.

We enlisted the participation of two individuals who are passionate about community building: **Peter Block**, an author, consultant and speaker on organizational

design, community building and civic engagement for 40 years, and **Dr. Gary Mangiofico**, the Graziadio School's associate dean of Fully Employed and Executive Programs and a MSOD professor for seven years. Peter had recently authored two books about his work in building stronger communities (*Community* and *Abundant Communities*). Gary, prior to his current position at Pepperdine University, directed Los Angeles Universal Preschool which led to transformational change in many neighborhoods.

Our first decision was to hold the event in Cincinnati, Ohio. That's over two thousand miles away from the epicenter of past alumni conferences!

We did this for two primary reasons. First, Peter lived in Cincinnati and was willing to encourage the involvement of many community organizers. Second, we wanted to make a clean break from past traditions. However, we needed to stay focused on our vision of modeling a community within the gathering. Thus, the six keepsakes were born!



Peter Block and Gary Mangiofico

THE SIX KEEPSAKES

Keep It Simple



A community can thrive wherever there are people and a genuine desire to connect. In keeping our focus on this simple recipe, we did not want to distract attendees with an exotic meeting venue, high-tech equipment or wild festivities. We are here to connect.

What goes into keeping it simple?

We rented a gymnasium at an urban community center. After all, this is where the majority of communities meet. Few have the resources for fancy hotels or large convention centers. We eliminated the computers, screens and projectors. We didn't want the focus on the front of the room; we wanted the focus to be on the people at tables. We wanted participants, not just attendees.

We rented folding tables and chairs. And, we did all of the room setup and breakdown ourselves. What an opportunity for bonding and building community! At the end of the event, it was powerful to watch all of the participants fold chairs, move tables and clean up the room. They were not passive bystanders; they were all part of a community. This was our collective room now.

Keep It Small

There's one thing that the largest events have in common with the smallest: everyone sits at the same sixty-inch diameter table. We made our focus about what happens at the table just as much as we focused on what was happening in the room. Nearly all of our

activities asked people to converse, discuss and collaborate with others at the table. We put pens, crayons, butcher paper, Play Doh®, colored pipe cleaners and other fun items on the table to encourage playful interaction.

We contracted with individuals (not companies) to cater the food. This made everything so much simpler. We spoke with the same person who was going to be cooking our food and delivering our meals. We were able to bring them into the spirit of the conference. More than just a vendor, they truly became partners in our mission.

We kept groups small when interacting with Cincinnati community organizations. Instead of bringing speakers to address our overall large group, we sent attendees in small groups out to the organizations. At meals, we used small square tables to bring people close together in a way that was reminiscent of eating with our own families. Being unable to hide in a crowd, attendees were seen, heard and, as our next keepsake explains, alive!

Keep It Alive

What makes us feel alive? What turns off the auto-pilot that has us drive our car without even remembering we did so? We have found three primary things: conversation, music and food. It is no wonder we enjoy going to a boisterous restaurant with a group of friends for an experience that combines all three!

Peter is almost fanatical about making sure music or art is incorporated into every event. He says that "we have no defense that can keep music or art from touching our soul." Watching someone perform resonates in our very being in a way that can hardly be explained. It is probably why listening to a musician on the street always sounds better than the CD we take home. Our opening presentation was a lone acoustic guitarist who shared her story and passion through songs. Our celebration reception was hosted at a youth



hip-hop center to experience a show filled with dancing, singing and music. Simply, music awakens us.

Not only does food literally keep us alive, but so does the act of appreciating the offering of sustenance from another person. We introduced the various caterers to our group, and each one graciously shared their stories and passions about food. They described how they had made our meals and openly showed their joy at our satisfaction.

And, as intended, we saw conversation as a goal—not a distraction—for the activities of the conference. The more dialogue, the better. We wanted people to hear from each other as much as we wanted them to hear our speakers. Session, breaks, meals, and transportation were all designed to encourage conversation. Even our selection of venues was done with the desire for conversation in mind, leading to our next keepsake: Keep It Close.

Keep It Close

Often, conferences are held at hotels. People come and go by elevator... and we all know that no one talks in elevators.

In Cincinnati, we picked a hotel and meeting space that were seven blocks apart. The celebration reception was another five blocks. And the various community organizations were spread out across town. We made our gathering a walking event.

When people are required to walk around a new town, they usually walk in pairs or groups. And, naturally, there is quite a bit of chatter. These "walk and talk" activities became just as meaningful and anticipated by participants as any of the other events. We avoided both distance extremes of too short (elevators) and too far (busses) to give people one more opportunity to connect.



Some conferences seek to have their rooms on the same floors or sections of a hotel to further encourage interactions. How about a step further: roommates!

We selected a hotel that had multiple room suites that easily accommodated two or three people into one common suite. With a living room and kitchen, attendees had an opportunity to continue the conversation as late as they wanted. People were able to extend that spirit of hospitality, which is our next keepsake.

Keep It Open

Some say that the quality of a community can be assessed by how well it welcomes strangers. This spirit of hospitality blurs or even eliminates that arbitrary line between "us" and "them." In trying to create a community that reflected these values, we aimed to be as inclusive as possible.

As described above, we invited the caterers to present their recipes and stories. We left the safe confines of our meeting venue and went out into the community to visit organizations. We asked community organizers to come back and sit with us to discuss what we had learned during our visits.

What had begun many years ago as a private reunion for alumni had now become an open and welcoming community that embraced the participation of non-alumni. The caterers, musicians, venue hosts, community organizers and other individuals we met were not just individuals that were hired to do a task. Instead, they were welcomed into our community where we could mutually appreciate one another's gifts and talents. This was a lesson in connecting that we hoped to continue after Cincinnati, and leads us to our last keepsake.

Keep It Going

Cincinnati was not just an event. It was a beginning. We want the lessons and behaviors of community building to travel back with each participant into their neighborhoods.

We christened this event "*The Calling*" and the next two years as "*The Journey*" until our next gathering for "*The Return*." Hopefully, we're just getting started.

We are building connections, even at a distance, with one another as we strengthen our virtual community. We are encouraging people to take their ideas, gifts and hospitality into their home communities and neighborhoods. We're collecting stories.

In time, these stories will become tools and resources to others. For now, we are finding ways to keep the momentum going.

As experts in change, we openly strive for making organizations and the world they operate in a better place (after all, no one tries to lead change for the worse). We do this by empowering people with the knowledge, connections and encouragement they need to realize and deliver their meaningful gifts.

We have come to see Cincinnati as a laboratory where we successfully created a community that did just this. We hope to see it replicated by each person who attended. And, we look forward to learning how you, the reader, builds community at your next event.

Let us know at william@williamsparks.com and susan.fleetwood@microsoft.com.

We are changing the world. One community—and one reader—at a time. ■



Pepperdine MSOD Alumni Board 2009-2011

