

The Risk and Subtle Reward in Building Community

Image



'It's an amazing thing that people really resist change, even if it's in their best interest'

Creating the conditions for people to experience “a-ha” moments about new possibilities for their community’s future and how they might take ownership for enabling those possibilities can be a lonely and risky business. The work is rewarding, but it’s a subtle kind of reward — one you have to search for to see, trusting that it will ripple out into long-term, meaningful change.

These insights surface through my conversation with Ana Pagan, soon-to-be retiring director of [Merced County Human Services Agency](#) in California, on her bold efforts

to build her community in new and different ways.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

Ana Pagan

“It’s an amazing thing that people really resist change, even if it’s in their best interest,” says Ana, who has been holding fast to a dream that the tide of prevailing poverty in her region can be turned. She has been energetically and imaginatively doing soul-transforming things to make this happen.

One of her efforts has included hosting gatherings each year for community members to come and talk about creating their community’s preferred future. This spring, another such gathering, based on Peter Block’s Six Conversations, took place.

While the agency has hosted similar gatherings, Ana decided this time to invite a master facilitator, Charles Holmes, to guide the experience.

“My frustration was that in the past we would have these playbook sessions and people would come up with, ‘We need this and this and that,’ but then they’d say, ‘OK, now you (meaning the agency) go do it.’ ... When we needed them to say, ‘OK, we’re with you’,” Ana says.

This time, though, there was a sense that at least some small breakthrough was made.

“I think what Charles did was reach people on an emotional basis and get them to understand that they’re part of the solution, which we had been trying to do, but somehow it had not worked as well as we had wanted,” Ana says.

Now more people in Merced County are seeing what might be possible if they claim ownership for creating their community’s preferred future. As well, more people are seeing the value in viewing the world through a lens of abundance rather than scarcity.

That shift, though subtle, is what Ana hoped would happen.

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Patricia Pratt is energized to see the children and youth of her home county, Merced, grasp the possibilities in art and creativity — for enriching their own lives, enlivening their community and generating income.

“Making the ‘a-ha’ moments occur for people is first and primary,” she says.

What Messages Do We Need to Stop Repeating About Our Community?

Lamar Henderson is one of those who experienced a kind of “a-ha” moment in the most recent gathering.

A father, community member, Merced County Human Services Agency employee and a Merced County Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Commissioner, Lamar says he was especially struck by one of the gathering’s focus on “What messages do we need to stop repeating about Merced County?”

“This was particularly meaningful for me because as a Merced County transplant I see great potential in our community,” he says. “One of the reasons I raise my family here is because I feel that I can personally influence my family’s safety and opportunity to thrive. This goes not just for (my family) but for our community as a whole.”

Lamar also walked away from the session with a deeper understanding the importance of “broadening our horizons of engagement as a way of meeting the challenges faced by our community.”

“If we plan to address disparities then we must look beyond government agencies,” he says. “It requires a true collaboration of passionate folks from the business sector, parents, youth, community based, faith based, non-profit, education and law enforcement because we’re all working with the same families. One group is no

more responsible than the other when it comes to building a healthy community.”

‘You Have to Keep Putting Yourself Forward and Connecting with People’

Patricia Pratt is another Merced resident who has clearly caught the vision in this community-building work. A staff member with the human services agency, Patricia became owner of a local art gallery last year that she is running as a for-profit social enterprise.

Patricia is passionate about supporting children and youth to see how the arts and creativity can be something to hold on to for life — as a means of generating income, enriching their lives and/or enlivening their community.

The [Mariposa Art Company](#) offers mural creation and some other programs at low cost to the community and they, in turn, subsidize the no-cost programs for children and youth.

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An energized participant in one of the Mariposa Art Company’s program for children.

In just this past year, Patricia and her colleagues taught 79 students, offered 113 no-cost workshops to local children, hosted 11 art shows and represented 43 local artists.

As one example of the impact of the work, a child with a heart condition creates cards each Christmas for her peers at the hospital she often visits. This past holiday season, she had more than 100 handmade, original cards to share, as the child participants in the art gallery program got on board with her vision and wanted to contribute.

Patricia shares her take on a life-view — one that may transform a community if more people adopted it. “A lot of times the negative (thinking) stops people before they even start,” she says. “They think that there is a block in the roadway when there isn’t, so you have to get over that, just keep putting yourself forward and

trying to make connections with people.”

Since this most recent gathering, Patricia is partnering with others to introduce a new arts experience for older youth, a screen printing apprenticeship. The screen printing could turn into an income as the youth create their own clothing lines, for instance.

“One of the main things that came out of playbook session is that there are a lot of services for younger children, but our teenagers are suffering and so we’re trying to come up with different programs that the youth will want to participate in,” Patricia says.

Great Movements Begin with People Dialoguing

As for Ana, she’s keenly aware that the shift that’s been created in the community is still very much in its infancy and will require nurturing.

“People are beginning to understand that they need to think in terms of possibility and poke the box a little bit and try different things... . The difficulty is that our bureaucratic structures sometimes don’t allow for that and those of us that do step out on the limb sometimes get cut off,” says Ana.

Ana is hoping to find some way to continue to bring people together inviting them to not lose sight of the realm of possibility and owning it.

“Great movements begin with people dialoguing and so we got that going here, and I’m hoping to be able to keep it going,” she says.

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