

Final REPORT

The City of Costa Mesa Listening Exercise Report
7 October 2013

I would like to begin the Listening Exercise Report with an excerpt from the prologue of Margret Wheatley's book *Turning To One Another: Simple Conversations To Restore Hope To The Future*:

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not meditation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. Simple truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well. What would it feel like to be listening to each other again about what disturbs and troubles us? About what gives us energy and hope? About our yearnings, our fears, our prayers, our children?

Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change--personal change, planetary change. Conversation, however, takes time. We need time to sit together, to listen, to worry and dream together. As this age of turmoil tears us apart, we need to reclaim time to be together. Otherwise we cannot stop the fragmentation.

And we need to be able to talk with those we have named "enemy." Fear of each other also keeps us apart. Most of us have lists of people we fear. We can't imagine talking with them, and if we did, we know it would only create more anger. We can't imagine what we would learn from them, or what might become possible from those we most fear. I hope we can reclaim conversation as our route back to each other, and as a path forward to a hopeful future.

It is my hope that this report will be received in the spirit of Wheatley's call to move away from fragmentation and alienation to conversation. ***The report's power will be severely compromised if turned into a tool for creating discord or greater polarization.***

As is the case with any organization during economically trying times, the City was and continues to be faced with serious challenges. Much of what you will read in this report could be the fallout of just having to make difficult decisions--like giving layoff notices, out-sourcing jobs, cutting budgets, and confronting the status quo. But I think it is more than that. Unfortunately, during difficult times it is tempting to explain complexities with over-simplified sound bites like--"Employees don't want to change, government is ineffective, or every decision is politically motivated." More over, it is easy to grow cynical and insensitive. Rather than talking about what "we" need to do, conversation is focused on what the "other" needs to do. There is no denying there have been critical incidents that have fueled the divide--lawsuits, press releases, loss of life, and misinformation to mention a few. I am not suggesting

that this report will make the anger, hurt, or frustration disappear. However, it can be a fresh start to creating an “us” culture in which both people and results are valued.

Background of the Engagement

“Without the willingness to challenge people’s expectations of you, there is no way you can escape being dominated by the social system and its inherent limits. Generally people will not authorize someone to make them face what they do not want to face.”

- Ronald Heifetz, Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government

The goal of this report is to honor the invitation to challenge the City of Costa Mesa’s leadership at every level. When I speak of leadership I am not referring to an individual or position but the interaction of people with various responsibilities as they serve the city together. I applaud your willingness to be disturbed by what you may hear—that willingness is your ally to a preferred future.

Tom Hatch and Rick Francis had been discussing future planning for the City of Costa Mesa. A primary focus of concern they shared was **organizational health**.

Mr. Francis contacted me and we had lunch to discuss his and Mr. Hatch’s concern. A few days later I met with Mr. Hatch and Mr. Francis to further discuss their leadership perspectives and challenges with respect to their roles and how they could best lead the City of Costa Mesa into its future. Then Mr. Hatch and Mr. Francis introduced me to the department heads. It was important to Mr. Hatch and Mr. Francis to make sure that the department heads were comfortable with the process and with me.

I conducted a workshop entitled “Leading In Difficult Times” for the department heads. I was then invited back to present an organizational listening process that could inform current mission, vision, values, and future planning. There was broad-based support for moving forward with the listening process.

The Listening Process

I conducted 28 group interviews (approximately 280 employees) using a modified Nominal Group Technique (NGT). NGT is particularly useful when you want to listen to the experiences and ideas of a large number of people but time is a scarce resource. The participants were representative of the city’s various departments. I also did one-on-one interviews with the City Council Members. Participation was voluntary and both written and verbal remarks were kept anonymous. Each person who participated in the group interview was given a sheet of paper with a question on it and asked to respond in writing. When the participants finished their written work they discussed their responses. When the discussion was completed each

participant submitted her or his written remarks to the facilitator. There were five questions:

1. What most energizes you about working for the City of Costa Mesa?
2. What most de-energizes you about working for the City of Costa Mesa?
3. If given the opportunity to make one change that could significantly improve your work experience, what would that one change be?
4. What do you consider to be the biggest challenge the City of Costa Mesa currently faces?
5. Is there anything we have not spoken about today that you believe leadership/employees need to hear?

Due to schedule restraints, employees who were unable to participate in the listening groups were invited to respond to the aforementioned questions via a web-based survey (43 people completed the web-based survey). The web-based survey was voluntary and the responses were also kept anonymous.

The following content analysis represents data collected from the entire sample (including City Council Members).

Content Analysis of Questions

The analysis is representative of the entire sample population of 323 participants (both listening groups and web-based survey) and presented by frequency of response.

Question 1: What most energizes you about working for the City of Costa Mesa?

Colleagues/Co-workers/Peers/Fellow employees/Staff

Family environment

Friendships at work

Hardworking colleagues

Proud of the professionalism of those with whom I work

Competent/Smart

We care for one another

Collaborating with other team members

Respect I get from other employees

Community

Making a difference

Serving/Giving back/Contributing to the public good

Working with the public/residents

Improving quality of life for those who live in Costa Mesa

Positive feedback from those we serve

Diversity of the city

Profession

- I love what I do/I enjoy my work
- The range of projects we do

Paycheck

- Livelihood
- Benefits

Note: Many of the positive remarks were qualified by the phrase, "What used to energize me..." There is strong sentiment that the City of Costa Mesa has slipped from being an employer of choice to an employer that simply does not care about its employees.

Question 2: What most de-energizes you about working for the City of Costa Mesa?

City Council

- Employees are disposable/Don't feel valued
- Lack respect for what we do
- Being attacked in the media
- Reactionary decision-making
- Lack reasoning for decisions
- Negativity

Loss of flextime schedule (9/80)

Lack of communication

- Breakdown in communication with management
- We are kept in the dark/Hear about changes through peers
- Layoff notices

Lack of leadership

- Not being backed up by management
- Uncertain about direction we are going
- Mistrust by upper management
- There is no "big picture"

Inadequate staffing

- Asked to do more with less/Overworked
- Losing quality employees
- Unrealistic timelines
- We are spread too thin
- Increased expectations
- Health and stress related problems

Work environment

- Decision makers don't care about us
- We feel like we are always walking on eggshells
- Culture of distrust
- Adversarial climate between employees and management
- Fear of losing job
- Lack of support

Lack of empowerment

We have experienced a loss of control of how we work

Decisions made by people who do not have the core expertise

We have no freedom to say no

Question 3: If given the opportunity to make one change that could significantly improve your work experience, what would that one change be?

Reinstate Flex schedule

Address lack of staff

Be realistic about productivity

Training

Improve

Create more opportunities

Improve communication

Leadership development (processes/decision-making)

Build trust

Create an environment of mutual respect

Empower employees

Stop micromanaging

Let department heads run their departments

Put decision-making back into professionals hands

Value and appreciate employees

Start caring for people

Listen to us

Create a strategic plan and goals

Unify City Council, management, and staff (not just for contracts)

Look after each citizen's best interests

Question 4: What do you consider to be the biggest challenge the City of Costa Mesa currently faces?

Build and develop trust

Overcome the distrust between City Council, Management, and employees

Improve morale

Reconcile differences

Re-establish public trust

Repair relationships

Getting rid of "us" versus "them" mentality

Clear direction

Unifying vision from City Council

Clear plan from Management

Communication

Cross departmentally

- Executive level to staff
- Create an environment of feedback
- Succession planning
 - Attracting good people
- Staff retention
 - Stop brain drain
 - Experience is leaving
- Delivering services to our citizens
 - Adequate staffing levels
 - Resource allocation
- Restore our city's reputation
 - We used to be a destination city-meaning people from other cities wanted to work here
 - Become a preferred employer
 - Provide unequaled service
- Political agendas

Question 5: Is there anything we have not spoken about today that you believe leadership needs to hear?

“This process is an important step in gaining the support and trust of employees.”

“As a fairly new employee, I have witnessed that Costa Mesa has the most hardworking staff in the industry.”

“Management needs to reach out to all employees and make each one feel that he or she belongs and is contributing.”

“To Council: most employees truly care about the City of Costa Mesa and take great pride in their jobs and consider it a privilege to work here.”

“To Management: Your employees are looking to you for leadership and are watching for guidance and your ability to work with the Council and Staff to make this a better place to work.”

“I feel that the City Council needs to concentrate only on working on policy decisions for the community and let management manage the affairs of the day-to-day operations.”

“Treat employees as people, not as a number draining the budget.”

“We need to get rid of the black cloud that is over us.”

“We need a healing.”

Great News

There remains energy for positive change. I could see it in the focus groups. Suspicion, reluctance, and skepticism characterized the beginning of each session but quickly gave way to curiosity, engagement, and hope.

The employees are not naïve. They understand the economic realities that call for change. There is a willingness to be a part of the solution at every level of decision-making. They love *their* city and they want their city to love them—that means citizens, management, and council members.

Regardless the recent challenges, there remains a firm commitment to serve the citizens of Costa Mesa. There is no doubt that everyone I spoke with loves the city of Costa Mesa and wants it to thrive into the future.

The Challenge of Change

As mentioned earlier, economic realities have necessitated that the City of Costa Mesa make difficult changes. When it comes to change, it is the role of leadership to create enough discomfort for people to see the need for change. It is also the role of leadership to create a safe enough environment in which people can change. With respect to creating discomfort, leadership has functioned well. Unfortunately, most of what you are reading in this report is the result of the failure to create a safe environment in which people can change. Quite frankly, the City of Costa Mesa is not unique. It is quite common for organizations to struggle with caring for and supporting their employees through change.

It is not an easy proposition to create safe environments when difficult decisions have to be made. When organizations are trying to just survive, it is necessary for leaders to default to a series of transactions (cuts, layoffs, etc.). In the short-term, it is prudent. Unfortunately, even the best of leaders can become numb to the pain that arises from making difficult decisions—decisions that impact an individual's health, a family's livelihood, and a community's safety.

Safe environments are created by affirming the value of employees, giving employees access to information, empowering employees to help frame the challenges, allowing employees to disagree, and letting employees participate in the decision-making process. Those are hard things to do in a reactionary environment.

Self-giving versus Self-protecting Behavior

Change is the dance between the people with the most responsibility in an organization and those who feel most vulnerable or dependent (us versus them). In an environment that is highly fragmented, you will see self-protecting behaviors from all parties. Self-protecting is primarily a defensive posture whose purpose is to protect self-integrity. It is quite appropriate and healthy to protect the self when

there is a threat. However, self-protecting can become maladaptive to the extent it inhibits learning from important, though threatening, experiences and information. A continual effort to protect self-integrity threatens the ability to have relationships with others—particularly those with whom we may disagree.

Some signs of self-protecting behavior are: refusing to listen to a perspective that is different from your own, reframing events to put yourself in a better light, projecting blame onto others, and failing to take responsibility for one's own actions.

Conversely, self-giving behavior is placing attention on and working toward the interests of others. It involves things like being willing to listen to a different point of view, being vulnerable, and taking ownership for your actions. Vulnerability and accountability do not exist where there is no trust.

Famed *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* author Stephen Covey explains that for there to be organizational alignment there must be trust at the interpersonal level. To have trust at the interpersonal level, there must be trustworthiness at the individual level.

Disengagement

Looking back at question #2, I think it is enlightening to refer the work of Dr. Andrew Stenhouse (Dean of Graduate School, Vanguard University).

Seven Steps Toward Disengagement (Dr. Andrew Stenhouse, 2012)

1. UNAPPRECIATED. The first of seven steps of disengagement, is feeling unappreciated. People feel belittled, under-valued, often talked down to and treated as if they're incapable of meeting any real expectations. Furthermore, the feeling of being unappreciated ultimately leads to the core belief, "I'm irrelevant. I do not matter."
2. MARGINALIZED. Marginalized people feel as if they are out of the loop on just about everything, usually learning of new policies and directives second or third hand. The resulting core belief is that I must be 'less than' everyone else. "I am inferior."
3. LIMITED. People feel as though they're unable to make differences through the organizational system as it is. It is too cumbersome and restraining. The feeling of being limited, results in the ultimate belief that one has no control. "Everything I do is controlled by someone else."
4. IMPOTENT. People feel as if they experience a continual erosion of power, and they've lost their ability to make a difference. You hear this with more experienced people. Losing power ultimately feeds the core belief of "I am weak, I've lost my strength all together, for good."

5. **RESENTFUL.** They believe that when they were hired, there was a shared understanding that the organization was going to invest in them and that they were going to learn to do their job really well. No one wants to feel like they are not doing a good job. The belief becomes, “I’m mistreated because I’m not as competent as I should be; and I’m not as competent as I should be because the organization has not developed me as promised. They let me down.”
6. **FEARFUL.** People feel so discouraged that they believe nothing is ever going to change. They have given up trying to make a difference, and are afraid that things will only get worse. If they feel fearful long enough, eventually they will believe that they are helpless. “I can’t do anything. Why try?”
7. **DISILLUSIONED.** People feel as if they have lost hope for a brighter future. Thinking about the future no longer instills optimism. In fact, it instills dread. They develop a feeling of hopelessness. “Nothing will ever change.”

Seven Steps Toward Engagement (Dr. Andrew Stenhouse, 2012)

1. TO BE APPRECIATED.
2. TO BE INCLUDED.
3. TO BE EQUIPPED.
4. TO BE EMPOWERED.
5. TO BE DEVELOPED.
6. TO BE TRUSTED.
7. TO BE INSPIRED.

Conclusion

Though I am writing the report, it is your voice (City Council, Management, and Employees) that is calling for a better future. That future is not possible without a commitment from every individual to move from self-protecting to self-giving. Trust must be established. It requires suspending feelings of the past and acting on hope for the future.

There is nothing surprising in this report. It is the first step toward a preferred future. The second step will be to embrace it, sit with it, and commit to doing something about it. The production of knowledge has been our first goal but primarily for the purpose of taking action that addresses specific problems.

The next stage of our work is for stakeholders (City Council, Management Team and

Employees) to identify and prioritize organizational objectives upon which to take action with respect to what we have learned. True learning is measured by the adjustments and adaptations an organization is willing to make. Once objectives are identified we will create a plan of action with measurables. Although the City Council and Management Team will be doing the initial strategizing, we will call upon stakeholders throughout the organization to participate in defining and creating a preferred future for the City of Costa Mesa.

“Everything that every effective manager does is sandwiched between action on the ground and reflection in the abstract. Action without reflection is thoughtless; reflection without action is passive.” – Henry Mintzberg

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chip Espinoza', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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