

Unicef's Annual Retreat in the Former Yugoslavia: the Facilitator's Story

Carla Vliex
cvl@tg.nl

Carla Vliex was the facilitator for an annual retreat of Unicef in the Former Yugoslavia. Here is her story of what she did and how she felt as she was designing and redesigning the retreat.

Once each year, Unicef staff comes together for their annual retreat. In Serbia /Montenegro, with staff spread across the country, a very active steering committee defined several plans for the retreat 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 on Meridith Belbin's teamroles at the 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 staff: 26 from Serbia and 14 from Montenegro. Several international staff who lived and worked in the area also attended. Around 30 people worked on programs, the rest were technicians, drivers, and administrators.

We wanted a framework to tie the plans together and make sure the most important issues were connected. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provided the framework for the conference. The initial conference design suggested by the sponsor was:

Day 1 Work with Belbin team roles

Day 2 Present last year's results in the morning

Open Space (OS) for the afternoon on day 2

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

After several e-mails and telephone calls, the program became:

Day 1 Open Space to do the work that needed doing

Day 2 Presentation of last year's results and exploring concrete plans for the next few months

Day 3 OS action planning in the morning

More Belbin to close the annual retreat.

I was very, very worried about this program. As we all were. Gradually, after some sleep and lots of beautiful and rich discussion with the sponsors, I and three Unicef people designed the flow we began with. Even during this designing phase we felt as though we were constantly in Open Space.

Day 1 Discovery

Given the urgency to work with the whole group as expressed by people in the group, we did not ask people to do interviews. Instead we came up with another way to help people get to know each other. 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.

Envisioning Unicef's future role in Yugoslavia

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 and that there were no pre-determined objectives. 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 very brief – just two minutes but it was enough.

That afternoon, I returned from a stroll to find everybody gone! I went to the bulletin board and the schedules had changed. People had gone skiing, some were playing cards in the pub, some were swimming. They really liked the butterfly role¹. 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

Nobody wanted to follow the formal program the next day; they wanted to stay in Open Space. The sponsor was concerned that the work get done. I told them that Open Space is not just a methodology but a way of being, acting or living. The commitment and spirit of OS was very real as everyone chose areas to work on and worked very hard all day.

We heard a few complaints that some people felt ignored or isolated. When we realized that this was mostly during social events, we put up a bulletin board for social events with 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 the 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.

Although we had a closing circle, the retreat was not over for people. Even though I said it was over, no one moved. We had lunch and yet there was still something left to do. In the spirit of self-organizing, local musicians and wine arrived. Singing and drinking closed the retreat. Now 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 differences not only between local and international staff but also between men and women began.

Reflections

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, Belbin teamwork 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 choose to use or need to use aspects rather than the full process of AI or OS. When I combine processes, I need to think it over and over. And, in my situation, help from the steering committee and the area manager was essential.

Endnote:

¹Bumblebees and butterflies are Open Space descriptions for some of the behaviors exhibited when people follow the Law of Two Feet. Bumblebees cross-pollinate, carrying ideas between sessions. Butterflies may never attend a session, but attract others to them. Like the butterfly flapping its wings causing storms elsewhere in the world, a gift of the butterfly in Open Space is that small acts – informal conversations – can have great effect.