

BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF CONSCIENCE AND CONVICTION

**LESSONS FROM
RECENT EXPERIENCE**

MDC

MDC, INC.

MDC works to expand the economy, develop the workforce, and increase per capita income in communities across the country, with a special focus on the South. Established in 1967 to help North Carolina make the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy and from a segregated to an integrated workforce, MDC has spent the last 30 years publishing research and developing programs to strengthen the workforce, foster economic development, and remove the barriers between people and jobs.

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Chapel Hill, North Carolina

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Finally, every page of this paper reflects the influence of our friend, colleague, and mentor George Thomas, who died as this paper was being finished. An independent consultant with two decades of experience relating group process and systems design to the worlds of nonprofit and community organizations, George joined MDC in 1991 to help us develop and launch the Indiana School Guidance and Counseling Leadership Project and remained to help us execute other major projects in school and community college reform. As our mentor, George was a passionate translator of theory into practice. He made sure that our skills in training and program design always kept pace with our programmatic ambitions. As a colleague and master trainer in MDC projects, he turned scores of educators, college administrators, and community leaders into deft practitioners of the art of change. As a friend, he radiated vigor and enthusiasm both in and apart from work. We dedicate this paper to him.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgments	i
List of Figures	iii
Introduction	1
Part One: Principles and Overview of Practice	5
MDC's core values	5
Origins, scope, and scale of MDC's work	7
Elements of a typical MDC planned-change project	9
• Design	9
• Participant recruitment and selection	11
• Training for group formation, issue analysis, and planning	12
• Implementation	17
• Evaluation	18
• Lessons from experience	22
Part Two: Nine Grounding Premises	24
One: Develop Teams To Work With All Levels of the System	24
Two: Develop Strong Team Skills	28
Three: Provide an Empowering Paradigm	37
Four: Focus on Critical Values and Their Implications for Action	43
Five: Link Diagnosis, Planning, and Implementation	48
Six: Equip People with Survival Skills	59
Seven: Build in Tangible Incentives for Change	61
Eight: Dignify the Learning Process	63
Nine: Offer Technical Support During Implementation	71
Part Three: Continuing Challenges	73
Widening the circle	73
Righting the power imbalance	75
Personal transformation	77
Sustaining the learning community	79

LIST OF FIGURES

	<u>Page</u>
Figure 1: MDC Process of Learning and Discovery: A Snapshot	14
Figure 2: Moving from Vision to Action: A Summary	16
Figure 3: A Sampling of Results from MDC Projects	20
Figure 4: Nine Operating Premises	24
Figure 5: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Grid	31
Figure 6: Building Blocks of Economic Development	39
Figure 7: The Cycle of Development	40
Figure 8: Defining the Current Situation	51
Figure 9: Force-Field Analysis Example	35
Figure 10: Stakeholder Analysis Example	56
Figure 11: Action Plan Example	57
Figure 12: Evaluation Planning Example	58
Figure 13: Workforce Alliance Planning Sites Timeline, 1995-1996	65
Figure 14: Workforce and Economic Development Links: An Historical Perspective	68
Figure 15: Indian Creek High School Reform Agenda	70

INTRODUCTION

American communities today are beset by deep challenges that cry out for civic action. We want our schools to do a better job of educating our children. We want jobs that reward hard work with wages that can sustain our families. We want safe neighborhoods with decent housing. We want the benefits of diversity without the fractious divisions that too often accompany it.

Yet the task of closing the gap between the conditions that frustrate us today and our aspirations for the future has perhaps never seemed so daunting. Education, jobs, safe communities, good housing, racial harmony are vast issues. Merely contemplating how to engage them can paralyze the well-intentioned citizen into permanent inaction. No wonder that few issues today generate more discussion and bewilderment among people concerned with civic renewal than "leadership" and its exotic younger cousin "social capital." Who can deny that we need leaders capable of cutting a path through the tangled underbrush of community life, not just as isolated individuals but in partnership with their peers and neighbors? Who would argue that we need the sustained commitment of civic activists with the courage to pursue broad common interests grounded in fairness and equity?

We know that democracy flourishes only when citizens claim the power to address the issues that most affect them. Civic abdication leads to social atrophy. But how exactly do citizens gain the

discernment, confidence, and will to take on the large matters that concern them? Is there a way to jump-start the kind of principled, other-directed leadership that leads to civic and institutional renewal? How can we create communities of conscience and conviction who have the capacity and will to act on their better instincts?

For nearly a decade, MDC has been experimenting with the pragmatic side of these vast questions by helping people who wish to renew their communities and schools find the levers of innovation and change. While our projects would probably not show up in a scan of "leadership development" programs or experiments in building "social capital," we draw on these traditions and we share with their proponents a belief that motivated people in trusting relationships are the lifeblood of community, whether that

community exists at the scale of a school, a neighborhood, a county, or a state. Our experience, while partial, has convinced us that society has many of the tools we need for constructing vigorous, generative, and visionary communities of problem-solvers, for building pools of principled, broad-thinking leaders who can replenish our increasingly burdened stocks of social capital. We offer the lessons of our experience — and the unanswered questions they imply — in the hope they will spur recognition, debate, and further refinement.

Who should read this paper?

We wrote this paper with three audiences in mind. Our first audience is colleagues engaged in work variously described as community building,

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leadership development, institutional and community change, and capacity building. These fields share a goal of equipping people to transform and renew the places where they live and work and the institutions on which they depend. To these colleagues we offer our reflections on the tools and approaches that have worked well for us and the experiments that have failed in the hope that our learning can enrich our common work and flatten a few learning curves.

The second audience is the growing community of funding organizations, both private philanthropy and government at all levels, that have begun to support the work of organizational and community transformation. We hope that by distilling the assumptions and principles on which our work is based we can give these funders practical insights for structuring and investing in new initiatives.

The third audience is the ranks of planners, consultants, community developers, extension agents, and others who are looking for new and more effective ways to stimulate creative problem solving in communities and institutions. We hope that this paper can provide them a practical primer on fresh ways to mobilize civic action and organizational renewal.

A preview of contents

The paper is in three sections. Part One provides an overview of the principles that guide MDC's work in community and institutional transformation, a short chronology of our experience, an orientation to the basic structure of the typical MDC project, and a concluding list of general lessons that flow from our experience and that guide our evolving work. Readers interested in a short and basic introduction to the work of planned change in communities and community

institutions should find this opening section helpful. For those who read on, Part One will describe the context for the reflections that follow and the path that has produced our convictions about the importance of collaborative leadership as the driving force in community and institutional change.

Part Two is an extended essay on the nine premises that shape MDC's current work:

- Develop teams that work with all levels of the system;
-

-
- What more can be done to right imbalances in power and engage the people most affected by issues of poverty, underdevelopment, and poor education in generating solutions?
 - How do we strike the right balance between the interior and the exterior work of leadership, between the task of reforming the self and the task of reforming the system?
 - How can we institutionalize the spirit of "reflective practice" that lies at the heart of effective leadership, both individual and collective?

Our answers to these questions are tentative at best — we are still working to figure them out. We invite the reader, both in the Conclusion of the paper and throughout the reading, to join with us in the continuing work of invention, practice, and reflection.

David Dodson and Julie Thomasson
Chapel Hill, NC



PART ONE: Principles and Overview of Practice

For nearly a decade MDC has helped people reform the institutions and communities where they work and live to improve their economic circumstances and life prospects. This paper describes the methods and assumptions that underlie our efforts to call people to consciousness about the challenges they face, about the future they can create, and about the ability they and their peers have to close the gap between the way things are and the way things should be.

MDC's work occurs at many levels — individual, programmatic, organizational, and civic. We work with and through people who join together in teams to take on transformative tasks.

Sometimes the work of these teams is programmatic, focused on finding a better way to address a nagging problem, such as poor student achievement or stubborn rural poverty. Often the scale of work is organizational, directed toward changing the priorities and practices of whole institutions, such as schools, community colleges, and economic development organizations. Sometimes the scale of work is civic, engaging a cross-section of a community or region in the task of designing wholesale approaches to large public issues, such as building a reliable supply of high-skill workers and a corresponding pool of high-wage jobs. Invariably, the work involves the creation of what Jane Jacobs, Robert Putnam, and others describe as "social capital," the deep reservoirs of trust and acquaintance

that make the work of social renewal and reconstruction possible.

The settings for MDC's work cover a wide range — from impoverished rural communities in the deep South, to middle-class public schools in the Midwest, to community colleges in the New Mexico mountains and the Appalachian coalfields. The subject matter is more circumscribed, reflecting MDC's history as a private nonprofit catalyst for innovation. MDC was founded in 1967 to use policy research and program demonstrations as tools to change the South's approaches to labor force and economic development and poverty alleviation. Our work in institutional and community change therefore concentrates on helping people reform and redesign approaches to workforce and economic development and education so that current and future generations have both

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the wherewithal and the opportunity for meaningful work and economic independence. Constant across both setting and subject matter is MDC's commitment to four guiding beliefs.

MDC's core values

Equity: MDC works to create unrestricted channels of opportunity so that people can progress as far as their talent and initiative will carry them. Our temporal and geographic roots, the 1960s in the South, lead us to address the barriers of race, gender, and income. Our practical roots in helping people gain access to economic opportunity drive us to frame equity as an economic imperative as well as a moral goal, to structure reform so that "self interest prompts

what justice demands."¹ We promote equitable access to the channels of opportunity because we believe society cannot afford the human costs of inequity. As the information economy puts increased emphasis on human skill as the source of comparative economic advantage, the economic and moral arguments for investing well in all people have begun to converge. The equity imperative assumes new timeliness and urgency.

Excellence: MDC believes that the foundation for true equity is laid when people, communities, programs, and institutions resist the corrosive pull of mediocrity and aim high. The will to achieve excellence, the desire to stretch the limits of capacity and then build the capacity to stretch further still, is most critical where communities and institutions have languished on the margins of opportunity, through either deliberate exclusion or the self-imposed caboose mentality by which distressed places declare themselves to be habitual "also-rans." Historically in the South, too many communities have a culture of low expectations. Good schools, skilled people, and visionary leadership have been viewed as unnecessary, expensive, even destabilizing conceits. Today, however, survival in the competitive world of global economics and political decentralization demands that these places set and reach higher standards or wither and perish. So therefore, we believe that the more opportunity unfolds and community flourishes, the more all people are able to think well, collaborate well, and produce well.²

¹ William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1942).

² Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

Inclusion: For MDC, communities of inclusion become the fertile ground where equity and excellence take root and prosper. A commitment to inclusion transforms the search for equity and excellence into a search for justice. For MDC, inclusion means institutions and communities where attention to equity and excellence is not selective, where there is an explicit goal to make more room for more people at the table without compromising the quality of the meal; where schools have advanced classes without artificially established enrollment limits; where community colleges reach out to unemployed and undereducated adults and equip them with marketable skills; and where economic development institutions measure success in terms of improved living standards for the many and not just a few. In a society that seems unsure of its own convictions about privilege and merit, MDC's appeal for inclusion — the soil where democracy and excellence meet — often strikes a distinct and constructive countercultural note. The appeal for inclusion is a challenge to abandon the view that equity must equate to "leveling."³ It is a challenge to seek the highest common denominator.

A belief in human capacity: To this trinity of values MDC brings a fourth conviction: that people have the capacity to transform their institutions and communities to operate more in congruence with the core

³ In *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1991), 199-200, his riveting book about the state of rich and poor schools in America, Jonathan Kozol writes citing Christopher Jenks, "'Despite a lot of pious rhetoric about equality of opportunity, most parents want their children to have a more than equal chance of success' — which means, inevitably, that they want others, not all others but some others, to have less than equal chances." Kozol's moral challenge that we must want the same educational opportunities for every child that we would want for our own children is a touchstone for MDC's work in school change.

convictions of equity, excellence, and inclusion. MDC seeks to spur and sharpen people's capacity to plan and implement reforms that result in tangible improvements in human opportunity and well-being. Our belief in people's capacity to make critical decisions to transform their surroundings is shared by numerous other democratic traditions, from community organizing to the town meeting. Our focus on carefully planned change — on helping people analyze and solve the problems that affect them — places us squarely in the mainstream of action research, pioneered in the 1940s by the Austro-American social psychologist Kurt Lewin and his associates.

Consistent with our belief in human capacity, MDC stresses invention over replication and dialogue over dictated remedies. Our role as an external catalyst is to provoke teams to "inquire into the nature of their experience" in organizations and communities, and "to develop their own ways of looking at the world," aided by the lenses of equity, excellence, and inclusion.⁴

Often this focus on helping people discover the truth provokes frustration among those with whom we work. They are used to expert consultants who peddle standardized solutions to problems. Midway through the process of analyzing why disadvantaged students in their school were underrepresented in advanced courses, participants in MDC's Indiana school guidance reform project challenged us: "You know the answer you want. Why not tell us and save us all this time?" They were shocked at our response: "We have clues that we can share with you, but you are the ones who know your school best. You, not we, are the ones who can piece the clues together."

⁴ Bruce Joyce and Marsha Weil, *Models of Teaching* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 225.

Kept at the table by MDC's facilitation, the school team eventually constructed its own analysis. In the process, team members became newly aware of the way certain school practices undermined the stated school values to which they all subscribed. Challenged to hold the mirror up to themselves, the team thus began to "notice the obvious" and "critically apprehend it rather than passively accept it as just the way things are."⁵ The result was transformational in two dimensions. Through the process of looking deeply at their environment, team members grew in their capacity as discerning persons. They also gained a new appreciation of their personal responsibility to the institution that they sought to change. "The system isn't outside us," said one team member, "it IS us. If it is going to change, we must change, too."

Origins, scope, and scale of MDC's work

Given the confines of our organizational mission and guiding values, the projects MDC has pursued in organizational and community change have been few in number but deep in execution. We began this work in the late 1980s, when the MDC report *Shadows in the Sunbelt* spurred a region-wide reassessment of conventional strategies for rural economic development. *Shadows* called on rural communities to reinvent their economies from within, rather than rely on an increasingly futile "buffalo hunt" for outside industry. Yet few rural communities understood how to create bottom-up economic development strategies. Thus, the call went out for the South to develop a new generation of civic leaders — black and white, women and men — armed with the skills and knowledge to develop more entrepreneurial economies.

⁵ Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 185.

Beginning with a project on the coast of South Carolina, MDC developed a rural leadership development program that combined four elements:

- a new conceptual orientation to rural development (emphasizing the goal of building high-skill, high-wage Southern economies to supplant the prevailing low-skill, low-wage reality);
- an introduction to model programs based on this new philosophy of development;
- a planning model designed to foster scrutiny of current development practice and an alternative vision and action plan for the future; and
- interpersonal, team-oriented leadership skills to help people from diverse backgrounds work together successfully.

By 1992, MDC had delivered a version of this program extensively throughout North Carolina under the sponsorship of the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, had codified the curriculum into a trainers guide, and had seeded the model from West Virginia to Oregon.⁶ In a subsequent modification, collaborating with the historic Penn Center outside Beaufort, South Carolina, MDC applied this model, called Rural Futures, to the treble challenges of cultural preservation, environmental preservation, and community economic development.

Late in 1990, MDC began a series of multiyear projects to foster systemic reform in schools and in workforce training institutions. We structured this work around four elements: (1) a conceptual reorientation to challenge conventional thinking; (2) a planning model to spur analysis of current practice and the development of visionary alternatives; (3) extensive work to build skills for teamwork and the leadership of change; and (4)

⁶ Julie Thomasson and David Dodson, *Rural Futures Program: A Guide for Trainers* (Chapel Hill, NC: MDC, Inc., 1992).

development as long-term strategies for poverty reduction.

While the basic elements that define MDC's approach to institutional and community renewal have been constant across all our work, MDC's institutional role has been as varied as our partners and projects. In the Indiana Guidance Project and Alliance for Achievement, we served as project designer, lead trainer, and technical assistance provider, even playing a funding role by providing small implementation grants to the project sites. In both projects, success and failure rested in MDC's hands. In the Rural Community College and Workforce Alliance projects, MDC is a partner with the funding source, with lead responsibility for program design and training. In the Penn Center and Rural Futures programs, we were partners with organizations indigenous to the communities where we were working. Each MDC project therefore forces us to confront anew issues of power, authority, and responsibility for project outcomes, testing our own skills at leadership and collaboration even as we teach these skills to others.

Elements of a typical MDC planned-change project

Whatever the application, we follow a sequence of steps over a number of years to plan and execute a project:

- Design;
- Participant recruitment and selection;
- Training for group formation, issue analysis, and planning;
- Implementation; and
- Evaluation.

Design. The first phase of work in an MDC change project is overall project design. During the design phase, we work on three

tasks: developing a conceptual framework to guide the project, developing a process design, and creating a training curriculum.

- **Developing a conceptual framework:** In order to act differently, people first need to see their situation differently. A central function of MDC's work with organizations and communities is to help people inside the system see the system and its future possibilities in a different light, to "unfreeze" conventional thinking. To help participants in our projects begin this process of "unfreezing" and "re-visioning," MDC develops a conceptual framework or philosophy paper that examines the topic of each project through the lens of our operational values of equity, excellence, and inclusion. The paper guides MDC staff as we design the various activities that occur during the training phase of our projects. The paper also serves as a stimulus to the creativity of the teams by giving them an intellectual foil for their own generative work.

Forged through dialogue between MDC staff and our project partners, based on our institutional research in workforce development, economic development, or education, and driven by the challenge of making complex ideas simple, each conceptual paper is the result of considerable intellectual sifting and sorting — the same process of discernment and decision-making we ask of participants in our projects with their teams. Each conceptual framework essay is also a "living" document, subject to revision as the project unfolds and produces new insights into the topic at hand. In both MDC's Indiana School Guidance project and

the Rural Community College Initiative, refinement of the conceptual framework has been a community event as participants in the projects are asked to critique and contribute to successive versions of the paper. The document ultimately becomes a group expression of the participants' collective learning.

- **Developing a process design:** Since each major MDC project is distinct in scope and scale, we always face the design task of fitting the common elements of our change model to the particular circumstances of each project (e.g., goals, funding, duration).

Certain elements are constant:

- Our projects invariably begin with multi-day, off-site residential training sessions to encourage team-building, with ample time for immersion in the ideas presented in the conceptual framework and discussion of future directions.
- All projects include homework or assignments during which teams of participants follow the sequential steps of MDC's strategic planning model, "Moving from Vision to Action."
- The product of the first phase in every project is a multiyear plan for institutional reform or community change, a plan that teams then proceed to implement.

Each project also includes hands-on technical assistance from

MDC staff and staff from our collaborating partner institutions during both planning and implementation. The assistance takes the form of site visits, troubleshooting telephone technical assistance, and periodic residential reconvening sessions to sharpen the leadership skills of the teams and keep them current with state-of-the-art program strategies in development and education.

Each MDC project arranges these constants differently, seeking to balance intensity (to engender momentum and conviction in our teams) and reflection (to encourage deliberate analysis and problem solving), autonomous work (to foster independent leadership capacity in teams) and support (to provide teams conceptual and process guidance through

how this work — and the skills required to do it well — are introduced and refined. Thus each training curriculum recognizes that adults learn best when they are able to apply new ideas to issues they care about; that trainers, like the participants, must be learners and that learners must be teachers; that true learning requires dialogue between the heart and the head in order to produce both intellectual movement and changes in behavior; and that learning is the act of developing a "critical consciousness" about the way things are so that we see ourselves and our surroundings with new eyes.⁷ We explore these concepts in greater detail in Part Two.

Participant recruitment and selection

Another constant element in each MDC project is the creation of leadership teams that we train to be catalysts for organizational and community change. The size and composition of teams vary with the scale of each project, from six-person school-based teams in our Indiana Guidance and Alliance for Achievement projects, to fifteen-person teams representing a cross-section of community interests and institutions in the Delta Workforce Alliance project.

Participant recruitment and selection occurs simultaneously with design. MDC selects teams carefully, since they are the fundamental structure around which our projects are based. In the projects we manage directly, we select the sites we work with and the team members who will represent those sites through a competitive application process. The application is lengthy, asking prospective team members, both individually and as a group, to answer questions about their experience working

with groups, the lessons they have drawn from past and current efforts at institutional reform and community change, and the challenges they consider most urgent.

After selecting the most promising applications, MDC staff then visit these project applicants on site, both to gauge the level of their commitment and to get a sense of the context in which they live and work. Site visits give invaluable glimpses into institutional culture, conflicts, and constraints. After a site visit to a depressed town in the Rust Belt of Indiana where a band of dedicated teachers and counselors struggled to maintain high standards among falling plaster and cracked windows, the anguished prose of the team's application took on profound new meaning. Similarly, during a visit to a Southern middle school in a racially tense town, the subtle inflections in the superintendent's voice as he discussed minority student performance provided clues to a judgmental culture that the prose application masked. This team was not selected.

Site visits make the stranger more of a known quantity. They allow MDC staff to hear firsthand the issues that teams care most about in their own words. They allow MDC staff to communicate the seriousness of the work we will soon undertake together and allow prospective participants to reflect on whether this is indeed a journey they truly wish to take. Though expensive in staff time and travel, site visits are invaluable to the team selection process.

Training for group formation, issue analysis, and planning

Residential training sessions are the centerpiece of MDC's work in community and institutional change, the place where skills and knowledge are cultivated, where dialogue about the things that matter most is fostered, and where the community of

⁷ Thomasson and Dodson, 1992, 12.

conscience is nurtured. MDC's training is concentrated and intense. In structuring our sessions we aim to create what Ronald Heifetz has termed a "holding environment," a place where participants are first challenged to debate the gap between the way things are and the way things ought to be and then guided to find the best way to close that gap. "A holding environment," writes Heifetz, "consists of any relationship in which one party has the power to hold the attention of another party" and facilitate the "adaptive work" required to collapse the contradictions between conflicting values or, in the case of much of MDC's work, stated values and actual institutional and community practices.⁸

Our residential training sessions are in many ways a procession of holding environments that move teams through three general phases of work: (1) diagnosis of the problem; (2) development of an alternative vision of the future, along with strategies and action plans to achieve the vision; and (3) implementation, evaluation, and re-visioning.

- **Diagnosis and discovery** — to examine current conditions and practices through the filter of values and concepts present in the conceptual framework. The result of this phase is a portrait, delineated by quantitative and qualitative data, of the current state of the target organization or community, and the elements that most urgently require change. In the Mississippi Delta Workforce Alliance, for instance, teams of institutional and community leaders from seven multicounty areas examined the competitive strengths and weaknesses of their economies and the fit between

worker skills and employer requirements. They then analyzed whether their economies were diverse and resilient enough to provide opportunities to local residents and whether education and training institutions functioned more as gatekeepers or facilitators of opportunity. Armed with this analysis of the "current state," they then decided what must change.

- **Vision development, feasibility analysis, and action planning** — to define the desired future and determine the programmatic and political steps required to transform current conditions. The results of this phase are a vision statement, goals, strategies, and corresponding action plans, with data-based long-term and interim benchmarks to help teams measure the pace and degree of change as they implement. The vision emerges when MDC asks project participants to examine the shortcomings of the current situation through the corrective lens of the core values that guide our projects: equity, excellence, and inclusion. Once they see the gap between stated values and current performance, we challenge them to "imagine a future consistent with their values." From this exercise in "moral imagination," inquiry into an alternative future based on values grounded in o

⁸ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1994).

-
- **Implementation, evaluation, and re-visioning** — to enact the plan, all the while engaging in critical reflection to keep the motivating vision fresh and to adjust the action plan to changing circumstances. The planning phase of our projects involves the most intensive training. But we have learned from experience that long-term success requires that the "holding environment" be sustained as teams implement their plans, for it is during implementation that teams typically encounter their toughest resistance and deepest doubts. Most MDC projects, therefore, reconvene teams at least annually for skill building sessions, moral support, and disciplined reflection to examine whether the original vision, goals, and strategies are still pertinent.

Undergirding each phase of an MDC project are ongoing activities to foster team formation and effectiveness, and technical assistance to help participants complete their work well. *Figure 1* describes what the heart of an MDC training project looks like.

As facilitators of the training sessions, MDC staff regulate the pace, content, and intensity of the work so that teams progress as smoothly as possible through the sequential stages of diagnosis, vision and goal setting, feasibility analysis, action planning, and ultimately implementation. The steps in MDC's *Moving from Vision to Action* planning process structure the work of the teams. (See *Figure 2: Moving from Vision to Action: A Summary*.)

FIGURE 1

MDC Process of Learning and Discovery: A Snapshot

	PLANNING PHASE		IMPLEMENTATION PHASE
VISION-TO-ACTION PLANNING	DIAGNOSIS AND DISCOVERY	VISION AND PLAN DEVELOPMENT	STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Articulate key values Conduct data-based analysis of the current situation Discuss dissonance between key values and current state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define ideal future state Set measurable goals Develop and select strategies Develop action plan and evaluation plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Execute strategies Evaluate results Refine strategies in light of evaluation
LEADERSHIP AND GROUP BUILDING	<p>FORM AND DEVELOP THE CORE LEADERSHIP TEAM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust-building activities • Activities to help in understanding of leadership styles (e.g. Meyers-Briggs) 	<p>FORM AND DEVELOP THE CORE LEADERSHIP TEAM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust-building activities • Training in group process dynamics and skills • Expansion of diversity; building understanding across racial lines • Expansion of core team/widening circle of allies • Self-monitoring and evaluation of team performance 	<p>SOLIDIFY AND EXPAND THE CORE LEADERSHIP TEAM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit allies • Manage resistance to change; negotiate institutional and community politics
DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss implications of conceptual framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss implications of conceptual framework • Learn about effective practices in the field • Visit exemplary programs and model communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply conceptual framework and strategies based on effective practices • Reflect on strengths and weaknesses of strategies • Modify conceptual framework and strategies based on experience

MDC ROLES	PLANNING PHASE DIAGNOSIS AND DISCOVERY	VISION AND PLAN DEVELOPMENT	IMPLEMENTATION PHASE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and lead training sessions • Unite and present conceptual framework • Create tool to guide data collection • Train and coach in techniques of effective teamwork • Act as 'conscience' to reinforce norms established by the group • Model teamwork and facilitation skills • Evaluate and critique team performance • Provide telephone and on-site consultation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train teams in Vision to Action planning process • Train and coach in techniques of effective teamwork • Design and lead "diversity training" • Act as 'conscience' to reinforce norms established by the group • Lead and/or broker site visits to exemplary programs and model communities • Catalyze cultural sharing and group celebration • Provide telephone and on-site consultation • Review and critique plans and proposals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconvene teams for skill building, exposure to effective practices, and personal renewal • Train teams in managing resistance to change, negotiating institutional and community politics • Act as 'conscience' to reinforce norms established by the group • Catalyze group celebrations • Provide telephone and on-site consultation

FIGURE 2

Moving From Vision To Action:
A Summary

STEP	PURPOSE	KEY QUESTION
1. Articulate Key Values		

In addition to managing process, MDC takes care at every phase to balance hard analytic and planning work with less demanding activities and ample doses of celebration. We have awarded teams with paper firemen's hats to signify the "hottest vision," and with hard hats to acknowledge the team tackling the toughest transformational challenge. In projects marked by significant cultural diversity among the participating teams, we

incorporate cultural sharing into the residential sessions. These cultural sessions often achieve more than intellectual appreciation of different ways of life; they frequently touch the soul. Hearing a Latino community college dean sing the songs of his Hispanic ancestors in a hacienda high in the New Mexico mountains drives home why his project team places such high value on culturally based economic development. Listening to wizened natives of the South Carolina Sea Islands raise the same hymns of lamentation and praise that their slave forebears sang explains better than words their resistance to the exploitative resort development that threatens their homes. The teachable moment comes in many guises.

Implementation

In our earliest projects in rural community development, MDC was consistently frustrated at being unable to link our training interventions directly to implementation. We had prepared people to act based on a new paradigm of development but lacked the resources to

provide tangible incentives and opportunities for them to take action. Follow through, and consequently, examples of real reform were intermittent.

With our education projects in the early 1990s, we began to link training and planning directly to implementation. The typical project expanded to a multiyear effort of team training, planning, and implementation, all supported by MDC staff. In many cases, implementation grants were added to the mix to give teams monetary resources to pursue their planned reforms. The added attention to implementation has shifted and tightened the *focus* of our training toward instructing teams in data-driven problem diagnosis, the careful development of feasible solutions, and the development of team skills required to move reforms through resistant institutions and communities.

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MDC refers to this last bundle of skills as negotiating the "politics of change." Once teams get past the initial planning stage, much of MDC's training and technical assistance focuses on helping teams identify and win over the gatekeepers who have the power to bless or block progress, to enlist the top-down support of formal authority, to reinforce the bottom-up energy and vision that the teams have generated, and to create win-win situations that enable fence-sitters and outright critics to say "Yes" to the team's vision.

At this point, teams discover the exhilaration and pain of trying to foster change in "open systems," institutional and community settings that are permeable to outside influences, benign and destructive, and are therefore beyond the strict control of any single change agent.⁹ This is where the rubber meets the road in our projects. When an MDC team, fired with a vision for high-performing schools, meets a phalanx of citizens who are deeply suspicious of school reform, the challenge becomes political as well as intellectual. When a rural community must negotiate its vision for sustainable land use with developers and bankers who favor intensive resort development, success demands a capacity for dialogue and tactical thinking along with substantive command of development issues. MDC's role is to build team members' skills and provide a sounding board to help them manage the "white water" of change without ending up on the rocks.¹⁰

As our projects evolved to place greater weight on implementation, MDC's core values have continued to ground our work. But the values are now directed toward practical expression in tangible activities that our project teams pledge to undertake. The work of teams has become both to know the good and to do the good. As *Figure 3* indicates, in several cases the resulting transformations have been powerful both in terms of measurable improvements in student performance or community development and in terms of

new pools of generative leadership left behind.

Evaluation

As MDC's work focuses more and more on helping teams implement strategies to close the gap between the ideal and the real, evaluation assumes a more critical place in our projects. Data-driven evaluation has become the logical corollary to data-driven problem analysis and planning. In all our training sessions, MDC helps teams learn how to measure their own progress toward the alternatives they seek and inculcates the value of consistent self-evaluation as a basic tool in managing change. The *Moving from Vision to Action* planning model further reinforces the focus on constant self-assessment by calling on teams to develop measurable long-term and interim goals consistent with their visions of the future.

Nowhere has the power of data-driven self-evaluation been clearer than in MDC's education projects. Here teams have used evaluation benchmarks to foster institutional dialogue about the best indicators for measuring student performance. Having internalized recent research that calls student performance in the "gatekeeper courses" of algebra, geometry, and calculus the best predictors of student success in college, MDC teams in our Indiana and Alliance for Achievement projects are using data to determine whether minority enrollment and success rates in these courses are increasing or decreasing as a result of their reform efforts. By choosing data-based performance measures that invite continued debate about the core values of equity, excellence, and inclusion, these MDC teams are using evaluation to move their schools toward their vision of education reform and to assess their

⁹ Marvin R. Weisbord, *Productive Workplaces* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1988). Weisbord discusses "open systems theory" and its influence on team-based approaches to organizational change.

¹⁰ Linda R. Fisher and Rose L. Kennedy, *Traveling Through White Water: A Manager's Guide for Organizational Change* (Highland Park, IL: K/F Productions, 1989).

personal and institutional fidelity to the
core convictions that underlie the projects.

FIGURE 3

A Sampling of Results From MDC Projects

PROJECT	MAJOR CHALLENGES	MAJOR OUTCOMES
Indiana School Guidance and Counseling Leadership Project 1991-96	Increase student achievement and post-secondary aspirations by improving the level and quality of academic guidance and counseling in Indiana schools.	Generated model programs: Minority and white enrollment
	Help guidance become the collective responsibility of teachers, parents, and school counselors.	
	Create a statewide network of visionary educators who share the project's vision.	

	Build the capacity of island residents to work together across barriers of race, income, and native/newcomer divisions.	Natives and newcomers now agree on an alternative land use plan to preserve the rural character of the islands. Together they are working to urge its adoption by local elected officials and developers.
Alliance for Achievement 1991-97	Link middle schools, high schools, and community colleges into an educational continuum to promote college-going and access to technical careers for disadvantaged Southern youth.	Generated model programs to increase minority enrollment in high-level courses that pave the way to college. Ensured that all students leave middle and high school with a clear understanding of link between school and college and school and career choices. Forged collaborative ties between middle schools, high schools, and community colleges.
Rural Community College Initiative 1994-present	Create a leadership team of college faculty and administrators and community members equipped to plan and implement educational and economic development initiatives. Increase economic opportunity in poor rural places and increase access to education for poor rural people. Build the capacity of the community college to be a catalyst for economic development and a beacon for educational opportunity.	Developed a revolving loan fund through a regional partnership of banks and a college. Developed a leadership training program at a college to equip citizens with knowledge and skills for community change. Built a college's capacity to serve business and industry with workforce training. Launched a major distance-learning initiative to link poor, remote high schools with a college.

Note: All MDC projects aim to leave behind a critical mass of motivated reformers, a stock of "social capital" for the institution or community undergoing change.

Lessons from experience

Clear lessons have emerged from MDC's decade of work in community and organizational change.

1. The individual, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic dimensions all require attention when the goal is significant reform.

Authentic and sustainable change requires simultaneous work on the structures, frameworks, and relationships that reinforce the status quo and restrict reform. People need to be helped to look within themselves, to see their neighbors in new ways, to view the possibilities and limits of their surroundings in a clear light. Attention to one of these dimensions without the others limits impact and builds frustration. Jon Snyder, the evaluator of MDC's Indiana School Guidance project, summed up the multiple dimensions of recognition required to ignite change this way: "First, people must see that change is required. Second, they must understand that they are part of the system and be willing to say, 'I must change first if I expect the system to change.' Third, they must come to believe that their actions, individual and collective, can make a difference."¹¹ Personal awareness, group awareness, organizational awareness, and systemic

awareness: All four must be provoked, sharpened, and nurtured.

2. People-in-relationship are the lifeblood of sustainable change. MDC works to help people find common cause across differences in personal circumstance

and institutional perspective. We help people find community around a shared commitment to issues that matter, to break out of an isolated recognition that conditions must change in order to forge group conviction about the need for alternatives. Our goal, always sought, sometimes achieved, is to cultivate the kind of four-stage "movement" approach to change of which Parker Palmer writes so powerfully:

- Isolated individuals decide to stop leading "divided

lives";

- These people discover each other and form groups for mutual support;
- Empowered by community, they learn to translate "private problems" into public issues; and
- Alternative rewards emerge to sustain the movement vision.¹²

In MDC's work, team dialogue and diagnosis — the reading of current practices and conditions through the lens of values and data — help individuals recognize collectively that they are living

Lessons from experience

1. The individual, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic dimensions all require attention when the goal is significant reform.

2. People-in-relationship are the lifeblood of sustainable change.

3. Communities, institutions, and their citizens are best defined not by their deficiencies and shortcomings, but by their assets, strengths, and creative imagination.

4. Change is a verb, not a noun. It cannot be delivered overnight.

¹¹ Jon Snyder, Unpublished assessment of Indiana School Guidance and Counseling Leadership Project for the Lilly Endowment, Inc., 1993.

¹² Parker J. Palmer, "Divided No More: A Movement Approach to Educational Reform," *Change*, March/April 1992.

divided lives. Suddenly people see that their schools preach that all kids can learn, but tolerate low achievement; that current economic strategies promise better opportunities, but deliver only low-wage jobs. The gap between values and facts is named publicly, and energy builds for generative problem solving. People-in-representation, engaged in inquiry that is simultaneously moral and pragmatic, ignites the fires of change.

3. Communities, institutions, and their citizens are best defined not by their deficiencies and shortcomings, but by their assets, strengths, and creative imagination. Increasing these assets is a fundamental task for an outside catalyst like MDC. Constructing tasks that challenge and expand individual and group skills is our largest pedagogical challenge. Perhaps the biggest obstacle we face in nurturing the inherent capacity of others is psychological. Regardless of the issue, community, or system where we work, we must always help people overcome the illusion that the answer to their problems lies outside them rather than in them. The surest way we have found to cultivate this rare but invaluable belief in self is to work with teams much as a coach works with an athlete or a musician: teaching technique, testing application under the hot light of actual performance, and systematically encouraging self-assessment and self-criticism to help people see how far they have come under their own power. Then, if we are lucky, we hear words like those of an Indiana teacher: "You said we had it in us... and we really did."

4. Change is a verb, not a noun. It cannot be delivered overnight. A decade has taught us the invaluable lesson that the deep reforms we seek do not come quickly.

For instance, only in the third year of working with schools in Indiana on the reform of fundamental practices in guidance and counseling did we begin to see significant changes in both school practice and, more importantly, student achievement. The work of diagnosis and discovery, vision development, goal setting, and consensus building by stakeholders inside the school had consumed the first two years of the project. Yet the result of this gradual approach to reform was a transformation in the operating values of the participating schools, one which reoriented both teachers' expectations of students and students' expectations of themselves.

Teams needed time to cultivate enough trust among their members to face the gap between stated values and actual institutional performance. Teams also needed time to muster the confidence and skill to act on closing the gap between values and facts. Leadership capacity needed time to develop, or unfold, in keeping with the true origins of that word. Urgent as the moral and practical imperatives were for change, success required that the reformers proceed deliberately. MDC now constructs its projects mindful of the time required to achieve real reform.

Beyond teaching us these four overarching lessons, experience has also confirmed nine operating premises we believe are fundamental to successful capacity building for institutional and community transformation. We examine these nine premises in Part Two. (See Figure 4.)

PART TWO: Nine Operating Premises

1. Develop Teams To Work With All Levels of the System

Each MDC project is structured to create changes in programs and policies and to build social capital within and between people in institutions and communities. The problem we wish to solve determines who is involved in each project. In reforming school guidance in Indiana (Indiana School Guidance and Counseling Leadership Project), we worked largely with single schools. In an effort to get more disadvantaged middle school students to college (Alliance for Achievement), we worked with middle and high schools, community colleges, community groups, and businesses. To

create a strong workforce development system (Delta Workforce Alliance), we worked with coalitions of public agency representatives, business people, and grassroots citizens.

Likewise, to create change in how a community approaches rural development (Rural Futures Program), we involve public agency representatives from economic development organizations, business people, and grassroots citizens. And to find ways for rural community colleges to become catalysts for regional development (Rural Community College Initiative), we work with college faculty and administrators along with a range of public, nonprofit, and private sector community representatives.

FIGURE 4

Nine Operating Premises for MDC's Planned-Change Projects

- 1. Develop teams to work with all levels of the system.**
- 2. Develop strong team skills.**
- 3. Provide an empowering paradigm.**
- 4. Focus on critical values and their implications for action.**
- 5. Link diagnosis, planning, and implementation.**
- 6. Equip people with survival skills.**
- 7. Build in tangible incentives for change.**
- 8. Dignify the learning process.**
- 9. Offer technical support during implementation.**

Teams as an organizing tool

For each of these efforts, we use a team-based approach for leading change. Our work is premised on the belief that change can be fostered by working initially with a core group of people representative of the system with which we are concerned. The origins of our team approach were pragmatic: From our earliest work in rural development, we sought to overcome the phenomenon of the isolated visionary who returns home from a leadership training program to confront the tough missionary work of building support and converting naysayers, one-by-one. Instead, we sought to build a "critical mass" which can return home and create a support network and an action-oriented team capable of tackling a complex change effort.

Also, we believed that teams which reflect a range of representatives from an institution or community are better able to comprehend the problems they face from a wholistic perspective — an essential precondition for both issue analysis and imaginative problem solving. And because the task of adaptive work in complex systems is generally beyond what a single individual can address, a supportive team of allies is required to facilitate implementation.

Who sits at the table?

In each initiative we are challenged to help sites identify the makeup of their team so that it effectively represents the system we want to influence. Our work is successful only if we change the hearts and minds of people at all levels of the system in question. In the 1940s, Kurt Lewin articulated a core principle of change — that we are likely to modify our own behavior when we participate in analyzing the problem, crafting the solutions, and carrying out the decisions we have helped make. We concur that people at all levels

of a system become "gatekeepers" to the success of change efforts.

Over time, we have found that significant institutional and community change is best made when people at the "top" of the system are involved with the core team, along with those with less formal authority. In schools, this has meant that we put principals and key representatives from the central office on teams along with teachers or guidance counselors. In communities, we ask that elected and appointed officials be on teams along with small-business owners, ministers, and grassroots activists.

Marvin Weisbord reminds us that "the field is strewn with the skeletons of... change programs that used all the right training techniques but had the politics of involvement wrong."¹³ Our own learnings at MDC have been advanced by some painful experiences. In our Alliance for Achievement demonstration, we worked with a strong team in Florida that included middle and high school teachers and principals along with community college administrators. After forging a plan that would have, among other things, ended tracking in the middle school math program, the team confronted powerful opposition from upper-middle-class white parents who feared that opening up high-level courses to more minority students would compromise the quality of their children's gifted and talented programs. The parents successfully pressured the School Board and the superintendent to scrap the move to de-track the math program, and the Gainesville Alliance team members were threatened with losing their jobs.

¹³ Marvin Weisbord, 91.

At the start of the Alliance for Achievement demonstration, MDC had ensured nominal support from the superintendent of each participating school district by having him or her sign off on the team's application. This experience led us to redefine for ourselves what we mean by involvement of people from the "top" and the bottom. While initially we felt that building-level leadership (i.e., principals) was adequate, this experience taught us that in school change efforts, those with ultimate authority must be won over — particularly when a plan for change will substantially threaten the status quo. A protracted struggle at the local level ended with the team withdrawing from the demonstration. Without the superintendent's involvement in the Alliance from the start, the team was stranded and forced to abandon its goal or face losing jobs.

In involving people at the "top" of a system, MDC also confronts the danger that people with the most power will dominate the change effort. In the Mississippi Delta, a Delta Workforce Alliance team was dominated by a man whose family owned much of the farmland in the target county. Even though family legacy was one of ownership and control in a brutally segregated society, this descendent held a deep concern for his county and entered the discussion earnestly. Yet by virtue of history and his wealth, his presence had the effect of muzzling the voices of his grassroots teammates. Only over time and with active facilitation from project staff were all voices heard.

Securing involvement from the "top," while not simple, is fairly straightforward when compared with gaining authentic participation from people with little or no formal power. MDC has typically aimed to include people who can come to the table with some level of

positional power required to influence change — representatives of the systems that serve people whose lives we wish to affect. We have yet to build in effective ways to involve people who are ultimately the beneficiaries of our work — disadvantaged students and their families or unemployed or underemployed people.

Currently, our core teams involve people whom we consider "grassroots leaders," people who have earned the trust and can reflect the interests of those who lack standing, power, and voice in the community. Thus, we might involve a respected neighborhood minister to represent residents of an economically shell-shocked neighborhood or a gifted youth worker to express the views of unemployed teens. We take this approach for two reasons. First, it takes serious, time consuming undercover work to surface the true indigenous leaders in hard-to-reach communities. We seldom have the luxury of such time on the front end of a project. Second, we know from experience that it is not easy for poor and powerless people to come as equals to a setting of predominantly middle-class professionals. They first need to be organized, to have sense of their own power, before they can express their interests and convictions with confidence and a fair shot at being heard. Shared power is a precondition to true collaboration; without it, representation can be tokenism. When MDC lacks the advantage of working in communities where poor people have been organized, we opt to work through proxy leadership to make the playing field more level.

We continue, however, to stretch our projects in order to bring disadvantaged voices to the table directly. We will explore this topic further in Part Three.

The settings and issues on which we work also demand that we pay attention to the diversity of voices at the table from a perspective of race, gender, geography, and class. The pursuit of equity and excellence requires a cold, hard look at the barriers that restrict progress. Inevitably in the South, these barriers often center on race — a force that colors every aspect of institutions and communities — attitudes held, policies developed, relationships built. By working with diverse teams of members drawn from diverse segments of the target community, school, or development agency, we found we could model the perspectives and attitudes present in the system that we sought to change. John Gardner writes that the transcendent goal of our time is to seek "wholeness incorporating diversity."¹⁴ We agree; it is a precondition to collaborative problem solving.

The pursuit of equity and excellence requires a cold, hard look at the barriers that restrict progress. By working with diverse teams of members drawn from diverse segments of the target community, school, or development agency, we found we could model the perspectives and attitudes present in the system that we sought to change.

Working with teams as representative members of the system has another advantage: providing a reality-check for real-world change. Working with teams in the context of training processes, we are able to overcome somewhat the inevitable unreal nature of a training setting. We have found that team-based dialogue about critical concerns facing the community or institution provides a useful testing ground for the problem-solving conversations MDC hopes to engender once teams return home. The team's hard work over the course of the training and planning process is, in effect, a field test of

the skills necessary for successful community and institutional change: listening to and sorting out different points of view; building a vision based on consensus; negotiating differences; and selecting strategies.

Influencing whole systems

While we have seen success from our team-based efforts in changing institutions and communities, we have continued to ratchet up the level of complexity of our change efforts without a corresponding change in the design and structure of our team-based model. While a team of five to eight teachers and administrators from a single school may adequately represent the school it plans to change, a team of similar size cannot be as representative of several participating institutions. In the Delta Workforce Alliance, we aimed to create not just a collaboration among the region's employment and training institutions, along with the business and grassroots communities, we also hoped ultimately to change the direction of some of the participating bureaucracies. This may be too much of a stretch, given the time and resources at hand. Deeper and more widespread institutional change would take several other layers of effort. This challenge is explored further in Part Three.

2. Develop Strong Team Skills

The existence of a team guarantees only that a diverse group will gather and talk — not that it will be effective. Forging productive working relationships among people who come to the table from varied

¹⁴ John Gardner, *Building Community* (Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 1991).

perspectives and who are of different ethnic backgrounds or geographical roots requires the same level of time and attention as building expertise in complex subject matter. We frame this task in terms of the need to build strong "leadership teams" with the imagination, will, and skill to transform the institutions and communities where they live and work.

While our ultimate aim is fostering changes in both policy and practice around workforce and economic development, we know that, unless rooted in a community's ability for collective debate and problem solving, programmatic solutions to problems go only so far. People-in-relationship are the lifeblood of sustainable change. While we work to ensure that people in our projects achieve specific, measurable goals, our hope is that we leave behind institutions and communities with social capital — stronger commitments, shared ideas, and relationships that equip communities to do business differently in the future.

Redefining leadership

This work typically begins by introducing a conversation about leadership — what it is, the qualities required for it, and how people view their own leadership capacity. We first ask participants to think of people they have known who were effective at leading change — in their community, their church, their business — and to describe the qualities held by those people. Once they have reflected on these qualities — inevitably a wide-ranging list of core qualities for effective leadership — we ask: "Is it possible for one person to possess all of these qualities?" And then: "What does it imply when the array of qualities required for deep and lasting change are not contained in one person?" We also introduce issues of power and authority at

this point: "Were the people that you spoke of always in positions of authority?"

Almost universally, the examples people provide describe a vision of leadership that challenges the conventional view as something exerted top-down by a single person in authority. In dialogue with participants, a definition of leadership emerges that is rooted in collective action and is about helping people turn their visions into reality. Further, we explore Ron Heifetz' definition of leadership as being about fostering adaptive work — the closing of the gap between one's own and a community's values and the current reality that runs counter to those values. In dialogue with participants, a definition of leadership emerges that is rooted in guiding values and collective action and is about helping people turn their values-based visions into reality.

This conversation allows for a testing ground of new concepts of leadership and inevitably forces people into painful recognitions of the failures of past "leaders." It also allows tough history to be surfaced and named (and often introduced for the first time to some), so that plans for the future are rooted in the reality of the past.

This dialogue extends into a discussion of the need for skills and practices that foster collaborative leadership. We begin at this point, and throughout the life of a project, to introduce an array of tools and approaches (not always labeled as such) that build skills for teamwork and foster team building in each participating team.

Setting norms

At the outset of every project, MDC engages project participants in the collective setting of norms or "ground

rules" by which the group wishes to live and work. We are explicit about our goal of creating a learning community among the group, and the conversation about norms begins to foster ownership of the "public space" we are creating for dialogue and deliberation. Not surprisingly, this conversation is the same in every organization, every community; and the list of desired norms always includes: respect different opinions, listen well, take risks, ensure participation from everyone, commit to follow through, have fun, stay on task, respect confidentiality. In addition to developing norms for a full group of project participants, we also encourage individual teams to set norms for themselves as well.

That's the easy part. No group successfully lives by this list at the start. Having had the conversation about norms, however, gives us permission to raise issues of how the full group or teams are doing in their effort to live by these norms. They set them; we act as their conscience to help them remember what they said and foster self-accountability among team members themselves.

Building relationships

In creating what Gardner calls a climate of "caring, trust, and teamwork that ensure the accomplishment of group purpose,"¹⁵ we focus on the question of diversity, and we come at it in a variety of ways. At the outset of a project, we often use the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to help teams uncover the diversity of personalities and leadership styles among their members. This tool, based on the work of Carl Jung, provides individuals with a useful picture of their own personality preferences on such issues as

how they learn, how they solve problems, their level of need for contact with other people.¹⁶ It underscores the fact that each of us has an individual style and that each person's style is marked by strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, the MBTI helps people appreciate the strengths and have patience with the weaknesses of each team member.

Perhaps more importantly, given our commitment to collective work, we have teams "plot" the personality type of each member on a grid, thus allowing a team to uncover its strengths and identify challenges it is likely to face as team members' styles conflict. (See *Figure 5, MBTI Grid*.) For example, if a team has several people who are strong at understanding data and determining possible strategic alternatives, its analytic work in MDC's strategic planning process will be fairly easy. The same group, however, may have only one or two, or even no people who are inclined to be concerned about the human side of the group's work — people who are "feeling" types who do much to help with team cohesiveness. By identifying these proclivities, and periodically reflecting on them, a team can anticipate its hurdles and sort out how to overcome them by creating the space to draw out latent personality traits in its members.

The MBTI provides a value-neutral way to understand differences. In some

¹⁶ The four core temperaments and their corresponding leadership styles depicted through the MBTI are:

1. SJ (Sensing, Judging) — a traditionalist, stabilizer.
2. SP (Sensing, Perceptive) — a troubleshooter, negotiator, fire fighter.
3. NF (Intuitive, Feeling) — a catalyst, spokesperson, energizer.
4. NT (Intuitive, Thinking) — a visionary, architect of systems

¹⁵ John Gardner.

projects, we go deeper, giving teams the opportunity to understand each other's life experiences and how they shape each person's perspective toward life and work. One tool we use is the creation of a personal "shield" or "coat of arms." We ask participants to reflect on the values most important to them, the people that have most influenced their lives, the events that have had the greatest impact on their lives — and then to share this information with their team. When a team of African Americans and whites from the Mississippi Delta shared their shields, they uncovered common experiences of inspirational mentors, the tragic losses of loved ones, and values based in religious faith and moved quickly to a level of bonding across racial lines that few communities in the Delta have ever approached. This bonding made the team's programmatic work dramatically easier.

FIGURE 5

MBTI GRID

TEAMWORK ANALYSIS EXERCISE*

1. Write the name of each team member in the square labeled with their MBTI type.

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ

2. As a group, discuss the following questions:

- What are the strengths of the team?
- What are the potential blind spots of the team?
- Who will have the most trouble communicating with each other?

- Who might feel like an outsider?
- Who will be best at mediating between team members?

* Adapted from Teamwork Analysis Exercises by Center for Applications of Psychological Type, Gainesville, Fl.

Developing communication skills

The skills of good listening and communication, like deep consciousness on racial issues, are not developed in a short training session. Still, learning the core skills required for effective work together lays a foundation for the work of individuals and groups as they dive into shared planning and action. In most projects, we provide simple frameworks to help people with the dual tasks of communicating their views clearly — what Kaleel Jameson called "straight talk" — and listening well to what others are saying. We ask groups to help us define good communication and provide them time to practice these skills. In addition, as group facilitators, we actively model good communication skills by restating difficult issues so they are understood, ensuring all people are heard and able to put forward their opinions, and often confronting group members who disregard good practice.

Equipping teams with facilitation and decision-making skills

Colonel Henry Martyn Robert contributed enormously to Americans' ability to carry out civic and governmental affairs efficiently when he developed Robert's Rules of Order. There are times, however, when we at MDC have cursed the Colonel and his Rules as we observe groups holding to them slavishly and, as a result, losing the benefit of real dialogue in the problem-solving process. It is our strong belief that for groups to hear one another clearly, deliberate, and make decisions that the full group is behind, a different methodology for group process and decision making is required.

In all of our projects, MDC exposes groups to the concept of facilitated meetings and decision making by consensus. We underscore that teams

should observe certain basics in every meeting: a clear, mutually agreed-upon agenda; a neutral facilitator; and someone who uses flip charts to create a public record of the ideas generated and decisions made in each meeting. Before teaching how to make decisions by consensus, we engage people in a discussion about the value of this approach and how it contrasts with the typical approach of voting on every decision.

The logic is compelling: Consensus decision making allows groups to avoid a split between "winners" and "losers," thereby building group cohesion. We teach the core tools required to develop consensus on issues through brainstorming, establishing decision-making criteria, and simple nominal group process; and then we coach groups throughout the life of a project. Because this approach does *not* come easy, we give every participant Michael Doyle and David Straus's book *How to Make Meetings Work*, which describes in detail the basics of good group facilitation. We label it the "little yellow book" and urge its use.

Confronting the barriers of race

Racial division and prejudice are woven throughout institutions and communities across America, the unavoidable byproduct of the history of this country. MDC's work is targeted to places where particularly vicious racism and oppression are alive in the recent memories of people. We know that for the economic or educational challenges that we are concerned with to be solved, the issue of race has to be on the table early on in the dialogue of a group, and the safe space that we strive to create has to be safe enough for people to air their anger, fear, and hope.

We put the issue of race on the table often before we have even met with a

group. As teams are assembled for participation in a project, we ask that they be representative of the community and want to know precisely the racial makeup of the team. When the numbers are not reflective of who a team purports to represent, we push back, asking for new members to be added or the team to be reconfigured.

Once training begins, the conversation about race often begins explicitly as part of the historical timeline exercise. In multiracial communities, the timeline becomes a tool to allow the historic truths about racial prejudice and oppression to be named in a safe, objective forum. The subject of race is so riddled with nuance and misunderstanding, and beginning our dive into that territory with the timeline allows for basic facts to be put on the table — important groundwork for ensuing discussions.

In many projects, we incorporate explicit "diversity training" aimed at developing and deepening the understanding that people of different races have about each other. Since our approach to working on issues of diversity requires the presence of a safe space for dialogue, we position the diversity work near the mid-point of the training sequence — after some trust has been built and early enough for trust to be rebuilt if it is threatened by opening the conversation. Our approach in this dialogue does not always center on race alone; we often explore other expressions of prejudice relating to distorted power relationships, such as sexism and classism.

We tailor the design of each diversity session to the needs of the group. At the same time, there are some fundamental precepts we weave into any session:

- Prejudice — the tendency to make critical judgments — is a natural human phenomenon that people apply to all kinds of life decisions (e.g., choices in houses, clothes, literature). But when people in positions of power let prejudice affect their decisions about other people, those on the receiving end inevitably suffer.
- Prejudicial views about race are deeply ingrained in American culture. None of us is to blame for the prevalence of racism. Each of us has the power to resist its downward pull.

We help people uncover the pride and prejudices of racial views through a variety of exercises. They vary, but the core questions we explore include:

- Who are the heroes or heroines of your group (e.g., African-American men, white women) and why?
- What are the stereotypes held about your group and what would you like never again to have thought or said about your group?
- What makes you anxious about working with people across racial and other lines?
- What would be helpful to get from other groups in order to better trust them? (For example, African Americans share with white people what they would like to have done or said by white people in order to feel more secure in entering into working relationships.)

At the start of these conversations, we ensure that people commit to confidentiality and that there is an atmosphere of willingness to trust and respect others for their honesty. These questions force individuals to reflect on the stereotypes they hold of others and to see the implications as they hear the pain others disclose. They often allow individuals to express the personal pain they have felt as a target of prejudice; and in that, they allow others to learn how it feels to be on the receiving end of prejudice.

The emergent conversations are profound. In Northeastern North Carolina, when the walls were plastered with African-American responses about the anxieties working with white people, the message was real and sobering: "Because of our current and historical experience, we will have a very hard time trusting you." The response from white participants was equally moving, as they asked: "What can we do to ease your fears?" While there was no immediate resolution, black and white alike left the meeting with a commitment to probe beyond the easy familiarity that had characterized their earlier meetings. In the Mississippi Delta, a young African-American man, after talking with an older white man and sharing the stereotypes they held of each other's ethnicity said to us: "That was one of the most moving experiences I've ever had — to share something so risky and deeply held with a white person." These experiences are, we believe, major milestones in the life of community — part of the lasting change in the way people do the work of community building.

Outside of the timeline exercise and specific diversity training, we inject issues related to race throughout a training process. When people gather data, we

insist that it be disaggregated to look at disparities along racial lines. When we discuss historical, economic, or educational trends, we point to the factor of race in the numbers. When we coach teams in how to expand their teams and widen the circle, we push for real and fair representation of people of color.

Finally, we are conscious about the process of relationship-building as we plan social events that occur during training sessions. Through breaking bread, drinking beer, dancing the Electric Slide, or storytelling, people's knowledge and trust of one another continues to build. Successful social interaction also requires intentional effort. Good parties don't just happen. They require not only logistical artistry but also purposeful effort — to decide where events should be held, and the significance of place; to decide how to offer music that will include everyone; to decide when to hold events so that younger people can play and older people can get enough sleep; to decide when the energy level should be high and when the group needs a more mellow evening. Likewise, evenings of cultural sharing must be thought through. When done right, the results of such events are wonderful. In the Rural Community College Initiative, a geographically and culturally diverse project, we organized an evening of cultural sharing that included Spanish guitar and ballads; Appalachian folk songs; old fashioned Southern storytelling; Indian story and song; and even, from our funder, poetry reflecting the life of a literary Jewish New Yorker. The evening was magical and moved the group to a new level of cultural understanding and community.

Personal reflection on the task of leadership

Throughout all projects, we continually frame the challenges faced in

each project as a leadership challenge, with the aim of keeping people conscious of the need to work and act in new ways individually and as a group. In some projects, we schedule time for personal reflection on people's own growth as leaders and agents of change — encouraging them to think among themselves about areas where they need to develop personally and areas of personal strength that they can offer the group. Gradually people begin to unhook from the semantic trap we face in discussing "leadership" and come to understand themselves as leaders. They come to appreciate that if the act of leadership is about working with others to close the gap between "what is" and "what should be," then they *are* truly leaders. Hearing people of all types begin to say out loud, "I never thought of myself as a leader until now," time and again is a joyous thing.

We have to resolve how far we should push people to face their own personal limitations as leaders. We set forth a high standard of behavior required of facilitative, shared leadership: listening well; being conscious of undercurrents of race, class, and gender issues; facilitating meetings using consensus-based decision making. For many people, these behaviors run counter to their habitual *modus operandi*. Most people inevitably lack some significant skill, and every project seems to have one or two people who are all but destructive to a group. With many, we see a strong attempt to adapt to new skills and behaviors, with glorious results. With others, the defenses are too high, the blind spots too large for real change to occur.

As teachers and facilitators, MDC staff must consider: Do we confront people directly to help them see counterproductive patterns of behavior? Can we still be trusted advisors if we assume the role of

personal critic alongside our roles of friendly coach and subject experts? These challenges are explored further in Part Three.

In spite of these unanswered questions, we believe that the collaborative work of diverse teams leaves behind people who trust each other and who have skills for collaborative problem solving that can guide the community as it confronts other issues. Writing about the Indiana School Guidance project in *Dare to Dream*, R.C. Smith notes: "Working in teams results in

convening the team at home. Initially, we treated team leader selection informally. As our experience with teams has grown, however, we have come to understand the crucial nature of the team leader. Regardless of how much shared decision making and activity there is among team members, the team leader must be a catalyst for the group, a planner and delegator (to get work done), and a communicator (to represent the work of the group to people in positions of authority). We therefore encourage teams to choose someone skilled at facilitative leadership who has time to devote to coordination. This person need not be the team member with the most positional authority.

We have begun to build into our projects the chance for team leaders to gather as a group, across sites, to share approaches to team management and to ask for help from MDC. In future projects, we will likely give team leaders supplemental training to develop their planning and group process skills so that they are not faced with the situation of learning new material at the same rate as the rest of the team and at the same time being expected to act on these learnings proactively and strategically.

3. Provide An Empowering Paradigm

MDC's major leadership and capacity-building projects seek to change the way people and institutions approach complex problems in development, education, and training. To encourage people to act differently, we use a variety of approaches to help them see differently — to break free of the conceptual confines that limit fresh thinking.

Our first device is a conceptual essay, a short paper written by MDC that we ask participants to read and discuss at the outset of every project. Each essay states the basic convictions that guide MDC's point of view on the issue being addressed in terms that make complex ideas broadly accessible. Since the teams with which we work are almost always heterogeneous, composed of both professionals and generalists and often spanning wide gulfs in culture and education, the language we use to frame the issue at hand matters deeply. By expressing complex ideas in simple terms, free of professional jargon, we are able to invite people to the work of problem solving more as equals.

For example, in the *Building Blocks of Rural Economic Development*, the essay we use in our rural development projects, we define economic development as the "process by which a community creates, retains, and reinvests wealth." The goal of rural economic development, the paper goes on to say, "should be to raise people's standard of living, not just to create jobs." The essay then offers four *Building Blocks*

essential to the development process: business development; workforce development; social infrastructure; and physical infrastructure. With this basic philosophical foundation, drawn from development economics but free of intimidating language, we provide a comprehensible definition of development

from "Can this work?" to "How can we make it happen?"

Conceptual essays also allow MDC to suggest how development or education challenges can be understood and resolved comprehensively. Here, the essays function like a prospector's map, telling participants, "If you dig here, you are likely to find something valuable." Our goal is to be directive without being prescriptive; to suggest areas based on research where a strategic application of time, energy, and money could pay off in terms of stronger economies, richer postsecondary options for students, or a better-equipped adult workforce. For example, in rural development we suggest broad areas for intervening within each of our six *Building Blocks*. (See *Figure 6*.)

Proposing and discussing these areas for intervening results in a framework tight enough to channel participants' energy toward productive ends, but loose enough to allow creativity to flourish while teams work to fit broad solutions to the specific needs of their communities. This middle ground approach is consistent with MDC's philosophy of "helping people find their way" toward solutions, informed by the wisdom of best practices but not hamstrung by the rigid ideologies that abound in the fields of development and education.

Finally, developing a conceptual essay also benefits the MDC staff by requiring it to clarify the principle issues at stake in a project before it begins working

with participants. The editorial debates that accompany the creation of a framing essay can be frustrating, but are an indispensable tool for creating an intellectually unified training staff.

Not all our tools for conceptualizing issues rely on the written word. One of the simplest and most powerful is the "Cycle of Development," a graphic depiction of the progression of wealth creation, retention, and reinvestment. (See *Figure 7*.)

In our training sessions, MDC uses the "Cycle of Development" to summarize lessons from a large group activity that begins with the question: "Describe a community where the economy is strong and works for people. What do you see?" Regardless of the setting, from the Mississippi Delta to the inner city, the responses come back the same: "good housing, good jobs, good schools, safe neighborhoods, health care." When the group has finished describing its ideal community, MDC introduces the Cycle of Development to invariable nods of recognition and approval. The lesson: We all know the kind of community and economy we want. What the cycle shows us is how it all depends on our ability to create, retain, and recycle wealth toward the well-being of the community and of future generations. Within an hour the simple graphic of the Cycle allows MDC to introduce key development concepts and a strong mental image of the ideal future.

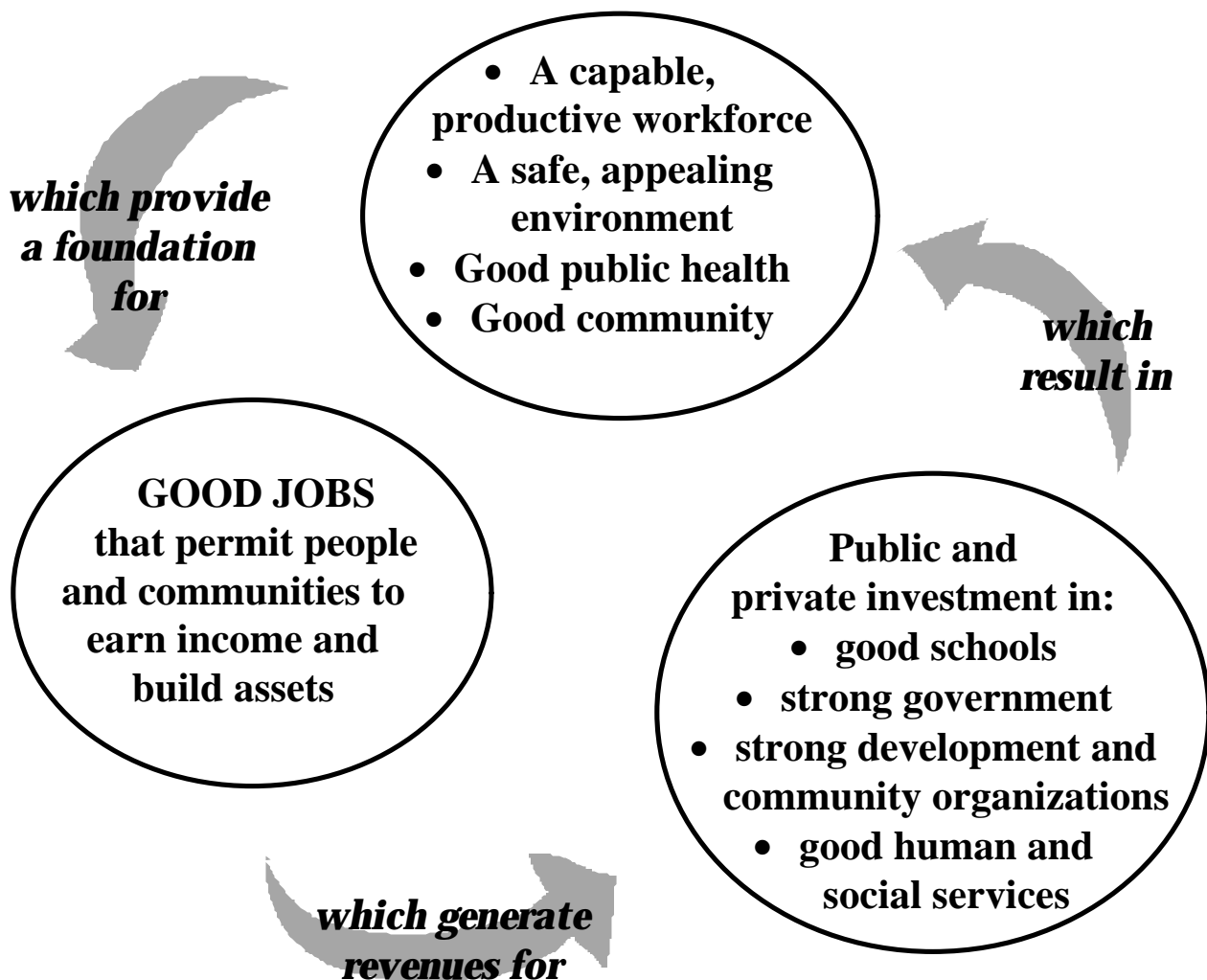
FIGURE 6

Building Blocks of Economic Development

Business Development

FIGURE 7

The Cycle of Development



Once introduced, in words or graphic images, the conceptual framework is fleshed out in several ways:

Inspirational speakers

All our training sessions feature keynote presentations by skilled practitioners whose core values resonate with ours and whose direct experience can illuminate and encourage the work of our teams. These "inspirers" come in two categories: "unimpeachable experts," eminent researchers or policymakers who can make an eloquent and accessible case for reform, and "in-the-trenches practitioners" who can describe the hard work of change. Both levels of expert testimony have special value. People pay attention when authority figures tell them that change is needed and that they have the power and responsibility to make things happen. When grassroots people hear a former governor or a noted educator say, "It is up to you," it invests the enterprise of reform with great meaning. Seasoned practitioners convey a different message: They convince us that "it can be done," and "if I did it, you can, too."

Nowhere are the insights of practitioners more useful than in our training sessions where we focus participants on the politics of change, the skills required to enlist support, build alliances, outmaneuver opposition, and prevail against resistance. Typically we invite one or more people to tell the story of their work, recounting how they helped a community or institution innovate in the face of hard challenges. To avoid the mere recitation of war stories, we always ask speakers to relate their experiences to the sequential steps of the "Vision-to-Action"

The work of convincing people of the power of their own invention is among our toughest tasks as teachers, especially when we work in systems and communities where creativity is discouraged.

planning model that forms the organizational core of our training-based projects. The storytelling can electrify, as when a former school counselor recounts her growing moral outrage at her school's failure to help minority students make sound career choices:

I had to challenge the rules that limited college prep courses to a narrow set of the best and the brightest students. We began to enroll any student who wanted to do college prep work. The principal and the teachers went crazy. Some kids stumbled initially. But we kept at it, and eventually more kids made it to college.

These tales of negotiating the politics of change are integrating moments in our training, illustrating that successful reform requires a clear moral vision, the careful assessment of strategic options for action, personal fortitude, and simple courage. Through the experience of ordinary people challenged by circumstance to do extraordinary things, an empowering paradigm of leadership begins to emerge.

Field trips

Whenever resources permit, we arrange site visits to exemplary programs. The most successful field trips are out-of-state excursions that give participants a chance to leave the confines of their regional or organizational culture and immerse themselves in less familiar worlds. Midway through a long leadership program involving Indiana educators, MDC took the group on a field trip to New York. The tour began with visits to innovative public schools and concluded with a site visit to an after-school program in Harlem. Not quite sure of the reaction

we would get from a group of mostly white, mostly suburban and rural educators — some of whom were on their first trip to New York, much less to a Northern ghetto — we were astonished when the stunned principal of a small rural school began murmuring to herself as she walked up upper Broadway. "No excuse. We have no excuse," she said. "If they can get kids to succeed in this environment, we have no excuse for failure in Indiana." In a single moment, miles from home, an assumption-shattering encounter with a different world had redefined the possible for this woman. Upon returning home with her team, she and her colleagues began to transform her school.

As powerful as such encounters can be, we have learned not to expect them automatically. We prepare participants for their field trips just as an invading army prepares for assault, briefing them carefully before the event. At the end of each tour we ask participants to write short reports to share lessons learned and hold formal debriefings to encourage the sharing of insights across teams. When participants evaluate their experience at the end of a program, they frequently cite the field trip as the most significant single experience in their training.

Effective practices, presentations, and casebooks

Every MDC project attempts to help participants develop innovative responses to their own problems based on the lessons learned from effective practices in the field. We introduce these practices in two ways — through practitioner panels and workshops during our training sessions and through program profiles and case studies that document exemplary programs. In sharing the good work of others, we try to encourage our participants to treat these practices as sources of

inspiration rather than objects of replication, since few development or education models translate successfully in pure form from one setting to another. In so doing, however, we struggle against a strong cultural tendency for people to believe that answers to problems lie "out there," in others, rather than "in here," in their own creativity and that of their peers.

The work of convincing people of the power of their own invention is among our toughest tasks as teachers, especially when we work in systems and communities where creativity is discouraged. We also continue to search for the best way to help people build on the guiding principles that underlie model programs. There is still a strong tendency among institutions and communities either to dismiss the experience of their peers as idiosyncratic or to consider it as gospel. In truth, learning from effective practices requires teams to distill wisdom from the experience of others and then apply that wisdom to their own circumstances. We have yet to master how to teach this skill.

4. Focus on Critical Values and Their Implications for Action

MDC's approach to change relies on the cognitive dissonance that results when people examine current reality through the lens of the ideal. For participants in MDC projects, the job of leading change centers on the task of realigning existing practices so that they harmonize with the core values that drive our work: equity, excellence, and inclusion. In every project we engage participants in extended conversations about the conflicts between "what is" and "what should be," producing a restlessness that whets the appetite for change.

MDC's emphasis on both the moral and the pragmatic dimensions of change reflects our institutional character as an applied research organization. The fields of policy analysis and organizational development on which we base our work share a commitment to putting values into action. In both process and content, MDC's work is rooted conceptually in this search for guiding values and their practical implications. We seek to help others define the gap between a values-based "ideal state," or vision, and the reality of current performance, to initiate movement toward the ideal, and to sustain their achievements through permanent changes in organizational practice or public policy.¹⁸

Two conditions are necessary to establish the creative dissonance that change requires. First, people must become

clear about what matters most. They must decide which values and principles are at stake or under assault. Then they need to read current reality through the corrective lens of those values, thereby clarifying fuzzy notions of the way things are into a focused image of what must be changed. These steps are the first two in MDC's *Moving from Vision to Action* planning process.

MDC's projects use a variety of devices to identify and foster discussion about what matters most. Conceptual essays like the *Building Blocks of Economic Development* and *Walking the Talk* directly challenge established thinking and restate core assumptions about economic development and education. In *Building Blocks* the measure of good development is not just "more jobs" but "higher-quality jobs" and improved living standards based on sustainable practices. In *Walking the Talk* a good school is measured not only by strong programs for the gifted but by a prevailing commitment to high standards and postsecondary attainment for *all* students. The conceptual framework essays redefine what success should look like in terms that place ultimate value on the long-term well-being of people and communities. Thus we place the work of reform in a moral landscape where actions have deep human consequences.

History and memory also play a critical role in summoning values and sharpening convictions about "what matters most." In MDC's Rural Futures training program, we ask participants to identify milestones in the economic, political, and social evolution of their regions in order to map the interplay of leadership, power, and community prosperity over time.

¹⁸ Harold Lasswell, the mid-century dean of American political scientists, defined the development of policy as the "the intersection of values and facts in the future." Similarly, his contemporary, Kurt Lewin, stated, "All change involves movement from a current state to an ideal future." Ron Heifetz discusses a similar dynamic in *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. (See especially pages 30-35 on Adaptive Work). MDC has found practical resonance between the two fields of policy development and planned change.

The regional milestones are first arranged on a timeline that lists significant events in the economic and political development of the nation and the South: the settling of the colonies, independence and agricultural expansion, the spread of slavery, the Civil War, industrialization, and Reconstruction up to the modern era. Then participants are asked to confront disturbing questions in order to tease out themes and patterns behind the events: "Does the history of our region tell the story of visionary indigenous leadership or of reaction to external events?" "Who set the development agenda for our region and who benefited as a result?" "How committed do we appear to have been to the values of equity and opportunity that we articulate in *Building Blocks*?" "What most needs to change to bring community practices into further agreement with our values?"

In the group discussion that accompanies these questions, traditional views often reconfigure themselves. Several years ago in a North Carolina Rural Futures program, we had a number of African Americans from the eastern part of the state and an equally large group of white participants from the western mountains. East and West have been political rivals for nearly two centuries, so the two groups began the history exercise conditioned to disagree. But after reflecting on their common plight in a rapidly urbanizing state, both East and West saw their current problems as the shared legacy of weakened rural leadership and unfavorable public policies. Suddenly both sides realized that only by joining together in a unified rural voice could they make their shared concerns heard. By reading a common history together, antagonists saw that rural unity was now the issue that mattered most.

Personal reflection activities produce equally powerful results in MDC's education projects. Early in our training, just after we introduce participants to the guiding principles of equity, excellence, and inclusion, we ask them to think individually and then in groups about the educational messages they received as students: "Who in your life stressed the importance of educational achievement?" "Who guided you to make the right choices in your education?" "Who planted and nourished the idea that college was a possibility?" "Did you ever receive negative messages?" "If so, who sent them?"

As with the history exercise, such personal reflection invariably produces strong and important reactions. Many participants recall childhood experiences of strong affirmation, recollections which strengthen their resolve to provide the same support to their own students. Equally often, minority educators, women, and people raised in poor families conjure up long-buried memories of being steered away from college and high achievement for economic or cultural reasons. "College was for the boys," recalled one Latino teacher wistfully. "It was never in our culture to support higher education for women." "I remember how we sacrificed to send my brother to college," said an angry educator from the rural South. "As a girl I was conditioned not to expect much." Both educators committed on the spot to giving future generations the support they themselves lacked as children.

Theologian Sharon Welch speaks eloquently about the catalytic role that memory plays in summoning the will to change current reality.

*Dangerous memories found
a community's sense of
dignity. They inspire
power and empower those
who challenge oppression.
Dangerous memories are a
people's history of
resistance and struggle, of
dignity and transcendence
in the face of power.¹⁹*

For participants in
MDC's projects, activities that navigate
history and memory permit people to see
patterns of resistance and triumph as well
as patterns of acquiescence and defeat.
They teach people that current conditions
are the result of actions taken in the past,
and so open the possibility that new
actions taken today can produce a
different reality, one more in line with
equity and fairness. Done well, the act of
mining history and memory also

different circumstances are met. Typically, MDC provides teams with a data guide directing them to the type of data needed, posing questions that can help interpret the data, and information on data sources. Unearthing and analyzing such data allows for the creation of what David Mathews calls "public information."

Effective communities appear to have more than just the facts. They know what the facts mean in the lives of the diverse people who make up the community. Public information is about interrelationships and consequences. It implies knowing the consequences of our own actions on people who might seem unrelated to us — but really aren't.²¹

Disaggregated numbers drawn from data analysis are used to illuminate fundamental questions about core values. Nowhere do they yield richer revelations than in MDC's school reform projects. Here we help educators find new and often disorienting meaning in routine information about the daily school schedule, course enrollments, and school demographics.

Because our projects try to help schools move more students successfully into college or the workplace, we focus data analysis on student placement and performance in higher level math and science courses, important predictors of postsecondary success. Meeting in their teams, educators examine standard course enrollment, completion, and failure rates by race, gender, and income and compare those rates to the overall demographics of their schools. Since minority, female, and poor students are typically

underrepresented in vigorous "gatekeeper" courses, this sort of detailed analysis usually transforms optimistic assumptions about the school program into a mosaic of challenges: What will we do about too few nontraditional students on a pathway to success, too many poor children shunted into low-level, dumbed-down, dead-end courses? Once the numbers have revealed their secrets, MDC leads the participants in a search for causes: "Why do these patterns exist?" "What can be done about them?"

At this stage, we often begin to hear conventional excuses: "These kids do not want to learn." "What can you expect with the homes they come from?" MDC attempts to reply through questioning and dialogue: "Remember our discussion of *Walking the Talk*? Didn't we all just agree that every child can learn? Didn't we just commit to giving every child the same education we want for our own child?" Heads nod in the affirmative. MDC continues, "So are we giving up on what we said we believe?" Over hours and sometimes days of this mutual exchange, the quest for the truth leads through familiar terrain — from blaming others to ownership of the problem, from the temptation to let hard reality erode high principles to a conviction to change the system.

The process of leading others to read reality truthfully, to face facts from the perspective of contrary convictions, is never simple and often painful. "I am overwhelmed by the immorality of what we are doing to kids," cried one Indiana educator after his team's data revealed nearly every minority student assigned to low-level math. "These courses lead nowhere. Only we can change this." "I had to leave the room," recalled an African-American counselor from another school. "Here we had been thinking everything

²¹ David Mathews, *Community Effectiveness: What Makes the Difference?* (The Kettering Foundation, 1987).

was fine. Why weren't my colleagues as enraged as I was?"

Just as with "dangerous memories," a moral choice looms as people read data through the lens of values. "Am I willing to do what it takes to 'walk the talk' and live by my values, or is the cost too high?" "Now that I know how the system is working, can I stay here without trying to change things?"

As we work with teams and individuals to help them answer these questions, MDC strives to create a learning environment where people can respond to the voice of conscience in safety, at their own pace, without being judged prematurely by their peers. Having such an "hospitable space for disciplined reflection," to use the Lilly Endowment's term, is vital for resolving the hard choices that arise when values and facts collide.

5. Link Diagnosis, Planning, and Implementation

The work of distilling the values that should drive change is useful only to the extent that people act on those values. MDC's approach ensures that rooted in those values, a plan is developed and then implemented. The provision of a structured approach for planning change equips project participants with the wherewithal to turn their ideas into reality. MDC's *Moving from Vision to Action* process (See *Figure 2*) guides the work teams do together and provides the structure for teams' plans for change. With plans in hand, the next several years are spent in implementation, evaluation, fine-tuning strategies, and planning the next steps.

MDC's approach to equipping people with planning skills is rooted in the action-reflection tradition of classic adult education. At each training session, MDC introduces one or two steps of the planning process. We allow people to practice pieces of this process in the training environment and ask immediate questions about its application. Then we send teams home with the assignment of putting the steps into practice as part of developing their plans. At their next training session with MDC, teams have a chance to share the fruits of their labor with colleagues from other sites and to reflect on what worked well, where they stumbled, and the implications for next steps.

This working-through of the *Vision-to-Action* process throughout training sessions and back home allows teams to experience forward momentum toward a plan or, sometimes, a proposal for funding that will support that plan. Our involvement with projects, however, does not stop here. These plans are put to the

test immediately in an implementation phase, during which MDC offers significant hand-holding and technical assistance.

Moving from Vision to Action: A structure for planning

The process of *Moving from Vision to Action* provides a coherent, easy-to-follow structure for planning adaptive work — uncovering the gap between values and the current reality and then setting out goals and strategies to address the gap. MDC creates a tailored *Vision-to-Action* planning guide for each project, providing examples that are relevant to the project at hand, along with a corresponding data guide.

Although we introduce the steps in a linear fashion, we make clear that the steps of any planning process often occur out of order, or in reverse, to be returned to again. Robert Marshak has contrasted the linear nature of Lewinian models for change with more cyclical Confucian and Taoist models, and it may be that MDC's approach falls somewhere in between these two. Confucian models are rooted in the belief that change is cyclical and journey-oriented; Lewinian approaches see change as destination-oriented. MDC acknowledges up front that a group's plan will change as it tests, evaluates, and even rejects various strategies for change. We do our best to help sites see that they will go back and forth between steps, sometimes skip one, and always be in a cycle of planning and evaluating.²²

Defining the current state: Steps 1 and 2 described in the previous section root the process in the cognitive dissonance that drives all other steps. The third step,

²² Robert J. Marshak, "Lewin Meets Confucius: A Review of the OD Model of Change," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 29, Number 4, 1992.

determining the current situation, forces teams to prioritize the challenges they have identified. A "SWOT" framework helps here. In addition to gathering data on both the strengths, or assets, and weaknesses of a school or community, we encourage people to examine external economic, political, or social forces — opportunities that face the community that may be exploited and threats that confront the community that should not be ignored. Teams determine their priority issues by answering the questions: Which strengths must we build on or weaknesses must we overcome in order to build on opportunities or avert threats that face us? The group process is inevitably messy, but teams emerge with a set number of "statements of the current situation" from which they can set a realistic number of goals.

Vision and goals: Once faced, the data can be used to help craft a *vision* and *goals* for the future. Our ideal is for the visions created by people in our programs to become a force that drives the process of change and that pulls people forward to an alternative future. It is an image, or picture, of success toward which the change process is directed. We are explicit about the fact that in the gap between the current state and the future vision lies a natural and productive tension. Data keep visions from becoming wild-eyed fantasies. Vision keeps current reality from preventing forward movement. The job of leaders (our teams) is to determine how much stress the system can withstand.

MDC encourages the process of visioning to be both creative and provocative. Teams are encouraged to express their visions in picture, song, or poetry. We have heard bold and moving visions sung to outrageous rap tunes and seen them in stunning artistic depictions on

paper. At the same time as they craft their visions, we encourage teams to begin the hard conversation about the fundamental values that motivate each person involved — so that opposing world views are surfaced and worked through:

- What about their communities do teams love and want to maintain unchanged?
- Why do they care about the economic future of poor, minority children?
- What is their view of the type of education and training that working poor adults should have access to and why?

When the answers to these types of questions are put forward and people have a chance to come to a common understanding of driving forces for change, teams find themselves on a sound footing to move forward.

Laying this foundation helps communities of leaders talk *through* issues, as opposed to talking *about* issues, a distinction noted by Mathews in his discussion of effective communities. He notes that "for decisions to be sound, a community has to face up to the hard choices that are involved in acting as a community. If we simply talk *about* issues we never come to terms with values conflicts and make the hard choices." Our hope is that once a team has gone through this visioning stage, it has found common ground such that when the going gets tough, the group can gain resolve from their common agenda.

Next, the process unpacks the vision by creating measurable goals — specific targets that answer the question: "What do we wish to achieve over the next

three to five years in order for our vision to be realized?" In recent years we have pushed teams to frame their goals as desired *outcomes* — a concept that sounds simple but represents a huge mental shift for most people. Most of us have been trained to think of goals as the actions we intend to take rather than the ends we intend to achieve. By framing goals as outcomes, we get teams to set measurable targets that can be evaluated. To facilitate data-based goals that correspond to data-based descriptions of the current situation, we use a "T" chart. A completed, hypothetical example appears in *Figure 8*.

For example, when considering the "Current State" example in which 35 percent of area seniors go on to postsecondary education, most teams will initially set a goal such as: Increase the college-going rate of seniors. Such a statement provides only a vague notion of what people want to see happening. It fails to describe the measurable transformation that teams expect students to undergo as a result of their actions. Setting clear and measurable goals (e.g., that 95 percent of area seniors go on to postsecondary education) is hard work, but we are relentless with teams; it has to be done in order to move ahead.

Strategy development: After defining *what* a group wants to achieve, the process turns to questions of *how* the desired outcome will be produced: strategy development. This stage involves two separate steps and, as a process of discovery, should take time.

We believe that the best strategies emerge from a careful look at the political, systemic, economic, and personal realities at play in institutions and communities. We encourage groups to use a "force-field" analysis to uncover those realities, and

develop the desired goals, and identify negative forces pushing and reinforcing the status quo or current situation. A force-field analysis carried out on the above example appears in *Figure 9*.

**FIGURE 8
DEFINING THE CURRENT SITUATION**

CURRENT SITUATION	DESIRED FUTURE SITUATION: GOALS (In 5 Years)
<p><u>Jobs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economic base of the Glades is still agricultural, but agriculture and related services provide 10% fewer jobs than in 1985. • In 1995, the unemployment rate of African Americans (19%) was more than twice that of Whites (8%). In 1995, the unemployment rate among minority youth and adults under 25 was 26%. • 25% of working adults in the Glades work at jobs paying the minimum wage. 	<p><u>Jobs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Glades has a diversified economic base, consisting of value-added agriculture, high quality eco-tourism, and small-scale entrepreneurial businesses. Glades residents also get a proportionate share of high quality jobs on the coast. • The overall unemployment rate for all Glades citizens is no higher than the state average, African-American unemployment is reduced significantly, and youth unemployment is reduced to 15%. • 75% of Glades adults work at jobs that pay family-supporting wages or better.
<p><u>People</u></p> <p><u>School Age Youth:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35% of Glades-area seniors actually go on to postsecondary education, even though 80% of high school juniors report they intend to pursue postsecondary education. • 50% of students in area high schools are placed into a 'general education' track; 84% of these 	<p><u>People</u></p> <p><u>School Age Youth</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75% of Glades seniors go on to postsecondary education or work after graduation. • General education tracks are eliminated. All students are in either college-bound or high-skill technical

**FIGURE 8
DEFINING THE CURRENT SITUATION**

CURRENT SITUATION	DESIRED FUTURE SITUATION: GOALS (In 5 Years)
<p>students are African American.</p> <p><u>Adults:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inter-institutional collaboration between schools and the community college is weak. • 35% of adults have no more than an 8th grade education and only 15% of area employers offer work-place literacy instruction. • Area basic skills programs are fragmented and understaffed. <p><u>Civic and Social Infrastructure</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child care programs only serve 65% of demand. The cost of many programs is greater than minimum-wage workers can pay. • The Glades has no source of organized philanthropy. Resources are concentrated on the coast. • Home ownership rates in the Glades are 50% for whites, 20% for blacks, 10% for Hispanics. 	<p>programs.</p> <p><u>Adults:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools and the community college function in a seamless educational continuum. • 85% of adults meet the entry level skill requirement of the competitive employers in the county. • Area basic skills programs are models of quality and collaboration. <p><u>Civic and Social Infrastructure</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child care programs meet 100% of demand with high quality and affordability. • A 'Glades Philanthropic Fund' is established at the regional community foundation. • Home ownership rates have risen 25% for each population group.

FIGURE 9

FORCE-FIELD ANALYSIS EXAMPLE

CURRENT SITUATION

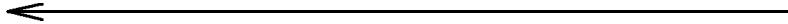
DESIRED FUTURE SITUATION

35% of Glades seniors go on to postsecondary education.

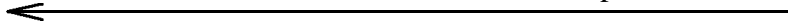
75% of Glades seniors go on to postsecondary education or work.

<

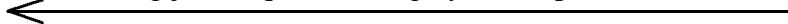
Many families fail to appreciate the importance of high academic achievement.



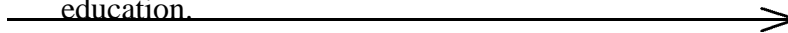
Glades has a culture of low educational expectations.



Existing jobs require few highly developed skills.



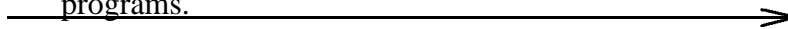
Average new job in 2000 will require 14 years of education.



Rising state achievement standards.



School-to-work legislation and demonstration programs.



Having a conversation about these negative forces might spark ideas for strategies to expose parents and teachers to the skills demands of a global economy. Discussion of positive forces might reveal potential partners for these strategies or help people see that the timing for these strategies is right because of state policy changes.

The second phase of strategy development is *research*. Most groups typically spend little analytical time thinking about pros and cons of strategies and learning from the experience of others. MDC projects encourage teams to talk to us and other regional and national program experts about what works. Through exposure to program experts, field trips, and best practice casebooks, we offer teams practical ideas for action. Also, we introduce teams to national or regional experts to expand their knowledge. Most recently, to further the process of strategy development in the Rural Community College Initiative, the Ford Foundation has supported a Technical Assistance Pool of approximately a dozen experts prominent in their fields and whom we have screened to ensure that they have hands-on knowledge and can work well with sites in communicating their knowledge.

Invariably we struggle with how to get groups to tackle both aspects of strategy development — naming the environmental conditions necessary for change and researching the substantive content of reform. For the teams that take the time to research best practices and debate their applicability, the payoff is great. They learn a valuable lesson — that wise strategies require leaders to scan the horizon for wise ideas and then adapt those ideas to the special conditions that prevail at home, to take what is "out there" and give it meaning "back here." Other teams

are in a hurry to adopt the first idea that comes to mind. These teams we push and prod, insisting that they look widely at options before they close in on a decision.²³ Many people are analysis-averse and action-prone and balk at taking so much time before they actually *do* something.

Before beginning implementation, we insist on one more step that, like the force-field analysis, provides grounding in the political realities of making change. A "Stakeholders, Analysis" asks the questions: What political or institutional factors should we consider in implementing this strategy? What effect will they have on our strategy? What stakeholders do we need to partner with? Ignore? Subvert? (See *Figure 10*.) These concrete questions energize groups as they examine existing obstacles and consider potential allies.

"Action Planning" encourages sites to make clear plans for who will do what, when, encouraging commitment and accountability. (See *Figure 11*.)

"Evaluation Planning" happens over the course of a year as groups clarify their goals and are able to set quantifiable benchmarks. An evaluation plan for this same strategy appears in *Figure 12*.

In the end, the *Vision-to-Action* process result is usually the core of a proposal that can be submitted for funding. While these proposals are an important product of the *Vision-to-Action* process, more important in this planning phase is the foundation laid by the group's dialogue around values and vision. Plans inevitably change, but the common ground found

²³ Our colleague, David Kiel of Chapel Hill, describes this as the need of groups to think "divergently" before they think "convergently."

during hard discussions about values and vision has the chance to hold a group together over the long haul.

The planning process is rarely neat. Groups want to collect data and then not analyze it, fall back on weak, nonmeasurable goal statements, pursue strategy ideas without engaging in critical thinking. At every juncture, when we are confronted by inadequate work, we send folks back to do better. They grouse, but in the end they inevitably thank us when they look at a product rooted in facts that provides a road map for their efforts.

FIGURE 10

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS EXAMPLE

Strategy: Create a Model School-to-

FIGURE 11

ACTION PLANNING EXAMPLE

Strategy: Develop a School-to-

FIGURE 12

EVALUATION PLANNING EXAMPLE

Goal: 75% of Glades seniors go on to postsecondary education or work

Indicators of Success	Baseline Year 1996	Year 1997	Year 1998	Year 1999	Measurement Tools	Who
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation levels 	65%	75%	85%	95%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-to-Work Council (SWC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness of employers of need and of training options and school-to-work programs 	about 50% aware	60%	70%	80%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal survey of literacy program providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community college: SWC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in number of employers that offer work-based learning options 	10	15	25	40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chamber and SWC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in PBCC enrollment of Glades residents in technical and degree programs 	15%	25%	32%	45%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview students and instructors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SWC

6. Equip People with Survival Skills

Ron Heifetz warns us that leaders must learn to "act on the truth without getting killed," either professionally or emotionally. MDC helps teams avoid untimely death in a variety of ways. Because political savvy is tough to teach in the abstract, much of our work on the politics of change occurs once teams are in the implementation process, during sessions where we reconvene participants to discuss progress and pitfalls. We find that teams have to be "facing the enemy" and looking for solutions if training and dialogue about the politics of change are to have value.

We customize our training to the issues teams are facing; unlike with our *Vision-to-Action* planning process, we do not have one set of tools to offer people for handling the politics of change. Rather, we respond to individual team needs and look for commonalities across teams so that they can learn from and teach each other.

For most groups, negotiating the politics of change involves attention to a set of universal issues that arise in any reform effort.

Widening the circle

The fact that our change efforts are team-based eases the task of gaining support for initiatives. Still, five or eight people do not a sea change make, and any team must find ways to involve others. We encourage teams to widen their circle of allies throughout implementation and to seek the involvement of key stakeholders — those from within their own schools or organizations and those from other businesses, governmental agencies, or nonprofit organizations.

The *Vision-to-Action* "stakeholders' analysis" of strategy ideas asks teams to discuss what percentage of each group will try to stop the change, the percentage that don't care and will do nothing, and the percentage that will be supportive and help make the change happen. This analysis helps teams see whom they must bring on board quickly to help and whom they must win over.

The actual approaches to doing the political work of widening the circle are myriad. Sometimes one-on-one meetings are required; sometimes public forums make sense; sometimes a "road show" in which groups take their ideas to various civic groups is in order. New organizational structures may be required to involve others, such as task forces or committees around particular strategies. Often all of these approaches are necessary.

Traveling through white water

Planning for and implementing change is inevitably threatening to some — whether it is the county economic developer who only knows how to recruit industry, the teacher who believes some students are doomed to fail, or the bureaucrat who is afraid his budget will be threatened by collaborative effort. And when reform must be accomplished through collective effort, the difficulty and complexity become more pronounced.

In their booklet *Traveling Through White Water: A Manager's Guide for Organizational Change*, Linda Fisher and Rose Kennedy describe the four stages that most systems follow in any change process: resistance, confusion, integration, and commitment.²⁴ There is little MDC can do to prevent certain inevitable human and

²⁴ Linda R. Fisher and Rose L. Kennedy, 1989.

organizational dynamics, but we are able to help teams anticipate "white water" by naming what they are likely to encounter and then by coaching them in training sessions and through technical assistance.

No amount of careful planning, however, can anticipate all the white water that a team will have to ride as it introduces new ideas into a system. Perhaps more important to team survival than any analysis or set of tools is MDC's own street smarts, honed with years of helping groups manage change. We use our intellectual radar to help groups anticipate rough waters: an historically black community college with a growing white staff that must confront internal racial dynamics if institutional progress is to occur; a nonprofit that wants to spin off a new, separate nonprofit and has not thought through the corresponding complex governance and "ownership" issues. Here we help teams put the issues on the table and encourage them to work through them.

In *Dare to Dream*, the authors write: "Advance knowledge of the challenges [in the Indiana School Guidance Project] helped participants 'know when to duck and when it is safe to stand up again.' Personal knowledge of the difficulty of change helped them understand and support their colleagues through the trauma."

Avoiding personal burnout

Experience tells us that many people drawn to the work of creating real change in organizations and communities tend to push themselves at the expense of personal well-being. Some, once turned on to the moral dimension of the work, are unable to escape it. One teacher notes of his dilemma: "I call it a curse. Once you understand what it takes, you keep on going, and it's a curse. There is always so much more to do." To respond, we have

begun to experiment with ways to encourage people to take stock and reflect on the balance of work, family, and fun in their lives. In one project, we hosted optional morning "wellness" sessions in which people were encouraged to contrast their personal priorities with how they already spend their time. Our efforts to foster this level of reflection are deeply appreciated by participants.

Beyond this set of common challenges, we typically create space in our reconvening sessions in which we ask teams about the "hot" issues they are facing. We then design sessions to fill this time slot in which representatives of teams gather to hear how their colleagues in other teams have tackled similar issues or to troubleshoot together to come up with

7. Build in Tangible Incentives for Change

MDC's major change projects all guide people from dialogue about critical issues through planning to action. Invariably, every project presents a similar challenge: how to get people to the table and keep them there for the duration of the change process.

Over time we have learned that many factors contribute to sustaining participation. Projects must focus on issues people consider vital to their well-being. Training sessions need to be challenging; they must expand people's horizons and build their skills. The learning environment should provide a safe and welcoming space for exploring issues and building a strong team culture. Yet often even these attributes are not sufficient to keep people engaged in the long and sometimes arduous work of reform. As we learned in our early attempts to work with economically disadvantaged communities, a lack of ready funding to allow teams to implement their ideas was often a major obstacle to realizing community improvement.

Starting with the Lilly Endowment-funded Indiana School Guidance and Counseling Leadership Project (ISGCLP) in 1991, MDC incorporated implementation grants into the design of our projects. After completing extensive training and producing a plan, participating teams received three years' funding to enact their visions for high-performing schools. Not only did the grants prove a powerful incentive for keeping teams committed during nine months of hard training, they also invested the entire training and planning phase of the project with deep seriousness. The work teams did together was not speculative. There was real money

on the table. Something could actually happen.

The Indiana grants had the virtue of being big enough (\$50,000-\$150,000 per site over three years) to make the work of each team an institutional priority within its schools and districts. This was a serendipitous consequence that helped ISGCLP combat the "reform of the year" culture that often defeats school improvement efforts that attempt long-term reform. The grants also rewarded the planning teams with an immediate return on the months they had invested in planning. This proved an important psychological reinforcement since it would be several years before the teams' plans would produce verifiable results in terms of higher student achievement.

In ISGCLP and in subsequent projects, teams are not automatically ensured an implementation grant simply by completing training and developing a Vision-to-Action plan. MDC treats a team plan as a template for reform. We scrutinize the details carefully: "Is the analysis accurate?" "Do the goals flow logically from the analysis of the problem?" "Are the strategies conceptually sound and politically feasible?" "Is there a clear action plan, and are the progress indicators sufficient to show the team if it is making progress?"

The act of negotiating these questions with teams and pushing them to answer with rigor is sometimes a prickly exercise for MDC. Having worked hard to fashion an analysis, a vision, and a plan, teams are often restive — and sometimes outright annoyed — when MDC staff challenges their assumptions or requires more analysis. In the negotiations that precede our accepting a plan, MDC must work hard to avoid being cast as both

Jekyll and Hyde, as enabling facilitator one minute and hanging judge the next. In our Alliance for Achievement project, we vested the ultimate funding decisions in the project's Advisory Board to minimize conflict. Generally we find, however, that once implementation begins, teams are grateful for having been challenged to better thinking during the relative safety of the planning process.

In the wake of ISGCLP, MDC has continued to incorporate implementation funding into major school reform and community improvement projects. The amount of the grants varies, usually depending on the scale and complexity of the undertaking, but also sometimes on the resources of the project's funder. Our grant-making methods have also been refined over time. Unlike ISGCLP, where the Lilly Endowment provided teams full funding for their plans, most MDC projects now provide only partial funding for implementation, requiring sites to match their grants in cash or in-kind and thereby leveraging deeper institutional commitment to the planned reform. Still we continue to struggle with the questions:

- How much is required to get the work started?
- What level of funding will reward the team for its work, lubricate the implementation process, and keep the work an institutional or community priority without proving excessive or inducing complacency?

We also struggle to help our teams find the best places to apply their resources to leverage the greatest long-term impact. So we now encourage schools to invest implementation funds in staff development and site visits to exemplary programs to

"widen the circle" of capability and vision within their walls. Communities are counseled to use implementation funds as "venture grants" to seed model programs or as incentive funding to encourage civic innovation, rather than to sustain ongoing operations. When our teams use their money to extend institutional vision and competence and to infect others with the will to try something different, they help foster innovation that spurs spontaneous creativity and moves organizations and communities to new heights.

Finally, in cases where implementation grant funding has not been incorporated into the project design, we have found it indispensable for the team or the project's local sponsoring institution to identify an energetic person who is singularly committed to raising resources to bring the team's plan alive. Absent this kind of committed, indigenous leadership, prospects for success are significantly diminished.

8. Dignify the Learning Process

The nature of problem solving requires a twin focus on content ("How do we want things to be different in the future? What program strategies will lead us to our vision?") and process ("How should we organize our work? How can we sustain our momentum?"). MDC's job is to help people become more enlightened and generative problem solvers on behalf of the institutions and communities that they serve and call home. We try to coach people to a higher level of understanding and performance in both the process and content dimensions of institutional and community renewal.

To do this job well obliges us, as teachers, to exhibit mastery of the material we transmit. Yet successful teaching rests on more than technical competence. It requires the minds and spirits of both teacher and learner to be focused on the shared work of discovery. And achieving this level of mutual engagement in turn requires construction of an environment, both physical and psychological, where the growth of practical wisdom can flourish.

The work of creating this kind of "hospitable space for disciplined reflection" and generative thinking is MDC's most invigorating challenge as we work with groups. The challenge is part conceptual: "What ideas lie at the heart of the work we want our teams to do, and how can we frame those ideas so that we engage people's hearts and minds and call forth their best creative energy?" The challenge is part operational: "What pedagogical tech0.727%ose ig D

small groups to find their voices enhances the possibility of safety." Working at a table "large enough to hold their materials, small enough for them to feel included, provides physical and social safety for learners. You can hear the difference in the room as learners find their voices in the small group."

Cognitive safety matters for learners, too. By "cognitive safety" we mean the security of knowing "why I need to learn what I'm learning," how individual activities fit into a scheme for the whole program, "and how the activities I will experience as a learner will prepare me for the work I hope to undertake for my institution or community." Vella writes, "Trust in the feasibility of the objectives and in their relevance makes learners feel safe. It is important not only to review the objectives with the group but also to point out how these aims have been established." Teachers of adults, Vella continues, should "point out that the objectives are empirically based, since they have been successfully used in similar situations."²⁵ In line with Vella's advice, at the start of every project MDC outlines its entire scope — the training timeline, including the content of sessions; the skills and knowledge that participants will acquire in each session; the opportunities for participants to apply new learning to the concrete issues they care about. (See *Figure 13*.) We return to these overview materials periodically throughout our projects, particularly in our complex, multiyear initiatives, so that participants can continue to see where they are heading with their efforts.

To make the unfamiliar less strange, MDC tries to introduce new material by

placing it in an historical and practical context. When we teach the steps of our *Vision-to-Action* planning model, we tell groups, "This is a variation on the standard strategic planning model that many of you have worked with. MDC groups have used it successfully to plan reforms in many settings — schools, rural and urban communities, and cross-institutional collaborations." By helping folks see that "people just like you have done this before," we help reinforce cognitive safety and demystify the unknown.

Since much of our work involves teaching teams new techniques in planning and facilitation for use at home with their peers, our program sessions often include dry runs where teams apply their newly acquired process skills to actual challenges they are facing. To make sure our teams can use their new skills to perform work and teach the skills to their peers, we try to debrief these simulations on two levels: process and content. So, we ask not just, "What issues did your data analysis reveal?" "Where is the need for change most urgent?" but also, "How did it feel to go through this exercise?" "What else do you need to feel comfortable leading it back home?" This process of action-reflection, of "doing, reflecting, deciding, changing," and doing again, in Vella's words, builds the cognitive safety teams need to succeed at independent work.

²⁵ Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989), Chapter 1.

FIGURE 13

Workforce Alliance Planning Sites Timeline 1995-1996

One of the most powerful tools for promoting cognitive security is the use of peers as teachers. After four years of working with educators in the Indiana School Guidance and Counseling Leadership Project, MDC came to the point where our expert faculty were all alumni of previous cycles of the program. Those alumni could speak about program strategies and the "politics of change" with a moral authority that no outside expert could invoke. They made the theoretical seem not only possible but strangely familiar. When one principal hears another say, "Three years ago I was sitting where you are, wondering what I was getting into. Now my school has been transformed," other educators begin to say not only, "I can," but "I must."

MDC tries to cultivate social safety from the outset of its programs. We begin our work with groups with a simple introductory exercise in which pairs of strangers introduce themselves to each other, sharing relevant biographical information plus "the skills and the concerns I bring to the project." Each pair introduces itself to another pair, sharing the same information, and then the quartets introduce themselves to the full group. As they do, MDC staff record SKILLS and CONCERNS on large sheets of paper, eventually covering the walls of the room. When all are introduced, we discuss the skills and concerns. Most often there are deep commonalities in the issues people feel called to address. Equally often, the collective skills and relationships in the group are more numerous than the concerns — a surplus of raw, untapped potential available for the work of reform. The act of recording the work of the quartets has a special power. Having made public their private fears and aspirations, having placed their skills at the service of others, people who began the exercise as

strangers now see themselves revealed on the walls as a nascent community of interest. Suddenly the social space is safer because the people who inhabit it feel themselves connected at a deeper level than before.

The sequencing of events in an education session can also contribute to both cognitive and social safety for participants. "Beginning with simple, clear, and relatively easy tasks before advancing to more complex and more difficult ones can give learners a sense of safety so they can take on the harder tasks with assurance," writes Jane Vella.²⁶ When these early, simple tasks are also designed to let people "find their voice," relate personal experiences to new conceptual material, or name issues they consider important, cognitive and social safety can reinforce one another. Consequently, in MDC sessions, we often follow the introductory exercise with an activity that encourages reflection and dialogue: either the interactive discussion of a value-invoking conceptual framework, such as the "Cycle of Development," or a guided memory or community history exercise (see *Figure 14*) that lets people relate the patterns of their personal experience to those of their peers or their community. In various ways, all these activities invite people to make private thoughts public, to personalize abstract events and ideas. Because they neither require nor reward arcane knowledge, these introductory sessions tend to place group members on an equal footing, whatever their backgrounds or professions. They foster multiple levels of safety for both individuals and the group as a whole.

²⁶ Vella, p. 7.

Mutual respect and humility

A healthy learning environment requires mutual respect between teacher and learner. Humility on the part of the teacher matters greatly, too. The tradition of action research views "the truth" in matters of social policy as a receding horizon rather than a fixed point in space. As human systems test new approaches to issues of development and education, they generate both complications and answers; these, in turn, inform the next stage of the quest. Wisdom unfolds; there is little value in recipes and dogma.

FIGURE 14

**Workforce and Economic Development Links
An Historical Perspective**

	Agricultural Era 1790-1890	Industrial Era 1890-1980	Information Era 1980-
Economic Context	Local and Regional	National and Bilateral	Global
Principle Sources of Wealth	Land Natural Resources	Capital Technology Natural Resources	Knowledge Ideas Human Talent
View of Workforce Development	Unskilled labor is critical High-level skills unimportant Weak integration of education and economic development	Low-level repetitive skills are necessary Managerial skills are critical Basic and vocational education become important to economic development	Skilled people a critical factor in economic development Strong front-line skills as vital as strong management Total integration of workforce skills and economic development
Dominant Educational Values	Low expectations for the masses	Increased expectations	

The search for wisdom begins with the admission that none of us can possess the whole answer, though each of us is likely to have valuable clues to the puzzle. Successful teaching, therefore, requires a comfort with and a commitment to dialogue, a preference for probing questions over packaged formulas. When this happens — and we struggle to make it happen whenever we teach — learning becomes collective discovery, and the sharp distinctions between teacher and learner blur. The surest way to this level of mutual learning is to teach with a humility that suppresses the need to answer first, to supplant the voice of the learner.

Meeting this ideal involves shattering traditional assumptions about the respective roles of teachers and learners. Our culture tells us that experts furnish answers. Nowhere is this assumption more prevalent than in the fields of economic development and education. When groups expect MDC to "tell us how to fix our problems," we are often on a rocky course until we can recalibrate the relationship between teacher and learner. The best response to an appeal for answers is typically to ask more questions: "What do you think?" "Do the strategies you've heard us discuss seem to make sense for your situation?" "Are they in keeping with the values you've articulated?" "What else might you try?" "Would it help to look around to see what others have done?"

A commitment to inquiry and dialogue does not mean that, as teachers, MDC staff are without convictions. In fact, at the start of a project we communicate strict nonnegotiables: the values of equity, excellence, and inclusion that undergird our work; the integrity of the *Vision-to-Action* planning process; a commitment to teamwork and collaborative problem

solving. But when the time comes for teams to fit these tools to the particular circumstances of a school or a community, the message is clear: "This is where *you* must take the lead."

When a rural Indiana high school internalized this challenge, the results astonished them and us. Taking as a guide MDC's broad principles — "High Achievement and Rich Array of Future Options for Every Student," "Strong Academic and Career Guidance for Every Student" — the team created a program of reform that touched almost every aspect of school life, from curriculum and instruction to parental involvement, to reconsideration of the roles of teachers, counselors, and administrators. Their outline of this reform agenda appears in *Figure 15*. The team leader was chosen national "School Counselor of the Year," and the school became a mecca for educators in search of ideas. Had MDC played the role of expert and prescribed packaged strategies based on our general but limited knowledge of the school, the results would have paled. Instead, we chose to trust the team's capacity to innovate, restrained our need to fulfill the stereotype of expert, and dignified the learners by holding them to high expectations and challenging them to perform the adaptive work of leaders. Today, three years after the project began, they are teaching us, thus confirming another lesson from Jane Vella: "Don't ever do what the learner can do; don't ever decide what the learner can decide."²⁷

²⁷ Vella, p. 13.

FIGURE 15

INDIAN CREEK HIGH SCHOOL REFORM AGENDA

Core Value:

- "All Kids Can Learn"

Operational Strategy:

- Open access to all classes
- Varying teaching methods to complement students' learning styles
- Removal of "general education"
- Required rigorous curriculum
- Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II
- 4-years rigorous English
- World History, Geography, U.S. History, U.S. Government, Economics
- Biology, Chemistry, Additional Science
- 3-years Foreign Language — or — Sequenced Career Cluster

Core Value:

- "All kids need academic planning and career development curriculum"

Operational Strategy:

- Commitment to "guidance curriculum"
- "Guidance curriculum" included in overall school curriculum
- 36 student competencies
- Individual appointments with counselors twice yearly

Core Value:

- Guiding kids is a whole-school/community responsibility

Operational Strategy:

- Teacher-advisor program
- Parent volunteer program
- Integrated career development
- Comprehensive Academic and Career Portfolio
- Service learning program
- Worksite learning opportunities
- Postsecondary courses on ICHS campus
- Removal of non-counseling tasks from counselors

**9. Offer Technical Support
During Implementation**

MDC sees community and

that they learn about good group process by watching us.

Finally in some projects, our funding allows us to reconvene sites to provide further training around particular areas of need. We double the technical assistance benefit of these sessions by creating the space for sites to provide technical assistance to one another, in peer learning sessions. Sites' learnings as they implement their program or policy ideas provide a rich source of good ideas for others. We are now exploring ways to make this sort of sharing ongoing through telecommunications networks.

For significant, countercultural change to occur, sites need an extended hand for several years of implementation. Our current struggle is to find a way to support the technical assistance teams require. This is a twofold challenge. First, the reality of project budgets faces us, and there are legitimate questions about what is a reasonable investment of time and attention to give each site. Second is the organizational challenge of being a small staff with human limits on travel capacity. We have dreamed of a network of consultants who can be our "arms and legs" in the field to extend ourselves without compromising quality control.

PART THREE: Continuing Challenges

Just as each successive MDC project helps us refine the core principles of our work, each new project exposes weaknesses and limitations in our current approaches to community and institutional change. Four critical questions challenge us at this juncture. We are wrestling with them constantly because they cut across every project we undertake, no matter the issue at hand or the complexity of the intervention:

- What are the best methods for teams to widen the circle of involvement of other people they need to succeed in their efforts?

images, no doubt because they suggest that the process of "widening the circle" is more organic than mechanistic, more about the diffusion of values, practices, and impulses than the strict application of formulas.

Perhaps the task of widening the circle can be likened to "infecting" the system with the "virus" of reform. If so, the work of the core team might focus on creating "hospitable spaces" for dialogue and experimentation within the community or institution — places where new ideas can incubate and gain strength before they venture into the larger system. Or the core team might concentrate on building learning networks to help new ideas flow between peers who are restless and receptive to change. Here the work of spreading the "virus" of reform begins to mirror the dynamics of the "movement" approach to change that Parker Palmer describes so eloquently.²⁸

A more savory metaphor for the process of spreading reform is the rhizome, the underground system of stems and nodes that certain plants use to reproduce themselves. Using this image, the core team might see its work as creating and connecting "pockets" of change agents who might initially work in relative obscurity, deep in the system, until they gain strength enough to go public with their ideas. Here the team would first put its effort into building a deep network for reform rather than undertaking more immediately visible efforts.

Or perhaps a better image is "cell division," with its emphasis on replicating structure together with substance. Using the cell division image, a core team might take its ideas to scale by establishing parallel teams elsewhere in the system. These teams would be composed and structured like the original and would be charged with expanding their membership and influence until a critical mass for change develops. Thus in MDC's Alliance for Achievement project, where the goal was to forge links between middle schools, high schools, and area community colleges, a core team drawn from the participating institutions would create "house teams" back at home to spread its vision, values, and strategies.

Finally, we might liken the process of widening the circle to an amoeba. This image conjures up something larger and looser in structure than a formal team, but more of a palpable group than a loose network, a leadership group that assiduously expands its influence by gathering others into its membership until it claims the whole organism.

It seems clear to us that the work of spreading reform is, at bottom, an organic process that relies on trust, relationships, persuasion, and incentives, rather than edicts and formulas to change organizational and community behavior. In the next stage of our work, MDC will be searching for process methods consistent with these emerging notions of widening the circle. A first step will likely involve experimenting with the "whole group conference" model for creating vision-based change in complex organizational systems. This model, pioneered in the 1960s and '70s

In struggling to answer these questions, we are drawn to biological images, no doubt because they suggest that the process of "widening the circle" is more organic than mechanistic, more about the diffusion of values, practices, and impulses than the strict application of formulas.

²⁸ Parker Palmer, 1992.

and now emerging into wider use, involves groups of fifty people or more to create an animating vision or preferred future for an institution or community. By allowing more people to participate in a discussion of values, vision, and their future implications at the front end of a change process, the conference model could have several advantages over the core-team approach MDC now uses.

First, from the start, the whole group conference involves a wider cross section of the system under investigation. The change effort can begin and spread from a larger initial base from the start of the process. The vision for reform becomes more inclusive and less the province of a small elite. With wider initial support, obstacles to implementing the vision may be fewer; certainly the initial challenges of spreading reform beyond a small core team are reduced. Front-end participation by a wider cross-section of the system may also permit a richer and more truthful reading of reality, as more people share insights on the obstacles and opportunities involved in change.

We speculate that if the sequence of steps laid out in *Moving from Vision to Action* could be punctuated by a series of whole system conferences to involve a larger core group in setting the vision, framing the forces that enable and inhibit reform, selecting strategies, and generating action plans, the entire system might be infused with the spirit of reform more rapidly than under our current approach. Designing and testing a process that *fuses Vision to Action* and the whole system conference model is MDC's next challenge.

Righting power imbalances and directly engaging all stakeholders

MDC's team-based approach to change assumes that team members are willing and able to work together as equals. Much of the training and technical assistance we provide teams is focused on helping them negotiate issues of personal style, communication, race, and gender that reinforce differential status within groups and inhibit collaboration as equals.

But sometimes circumstances require more. Most of the impoverished communities in which we work suffer from entrenched power for a few and powerlessness for the many. In these places, history and tradition, self-image, and, sometimes, deliberate action prevent

When team members sense that the space is safe for honest discourse, they sometimes engage the toughest power issues voluntarily, as in this exchange between a wealthy white landowner and a black community activist on a rural development project team in the Deep South:

Activist: Here we are talking about jobs, but I have not been able to get a job in this county since 1973. So I have to commute outside the county because no one here will hire me.

Landowner: Do you know why you haven't been able to get a job in this county since 1973?

Activist: No. Why?

Landowner: Because you acted up in 1972.

In this exchange, covert issues of power and exclusion were made graphically clear not only for the duo in dialogue but for the whole county-based core team that witnessed the exchange. From that point on, the team's discussion was transformed, and its final plan for economic reform in the county became all the more effective because the truths about power and exclusion had been exposed. Unfortunately, this kind of frank revelation about power and powerlessness is rare in a team, and the dialogue is even harder to initiate and sustain when the team moves into the community to widen the circle.

MDC's friends in the community-organizing field have suggested two approaches for coming to terms with the power imbalance in the communities where we work. John Gaventa and Brenda Bell, scholar/organizers with decades of

experiences in Appalachian communities, advise that community improvement and institutional change may stand a greater chance for success in places where grassroots community organizing has first created a more level playing field. They believe that:

[O]nly as relatively poor and powerless citizens are organized collectively can they effectively come to the table and participate more equally with other sectors of the community. This work of community organizing sometimes involves confrontation in order to surface issues which have been ignored or to give voice to people who have been excluded. But as Paulo Freire says in his book with Myles Horton, "Conflict is the midwife of consciousness." It may serve as a precondition to personal and community transformation that allows deeper collaboration and participation to occur.²⁹

Other colleagues counsel that MDC should place issues of personal, institutional, and community status explicitly on the agenda for teams. This would require deeper training on the distorting effects and strategic uses of power, possibly using the team itself as a laboratory.

The views of our organizer friends pose two implications. We must either direct our efforts to places where grassroots organizing has occurred or find a way to integrate organizing strategies into our multiyear efforts to reform development and education practices. The second challenge will be easier to address in the short term. In upcoming projects we would like to collaborate with peer organizations

²⁹ John Gaventa and Brenda Bell, an unpublished paper for the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, 1996.

that approach reform from an organizer's perspective in order to develop models for leading change that deal more explicitly with the dynamics of power. We believe that a model which fuses the organizer's realism with MDC's emphasis on consensus, teamwork, and values-driven reform could help the practical idealists we work with be much more successful.

Personal transformation

In all of our projects, there are people who uncover forgotten but deeply held values and who discover their potential as strong and effective agents of change. Their awakenings are intensely personal and powerful. Many participants also make great strides in their behavioral approaches to leading change, becoming more effective communicators, better at working across differences. Many others, however, blocked by years of defenses and bad habits, make little progress in developing themselves personally as leaders, and it interferes with the success of their work and the work of the team.

Warren Bennis describes a core trait of effective leadership as the "deployment of self" — the ability to use one's strengths and to understand one's weaknesses and either overcome them or compensate for them through strategic alliances with others.³⁰ This is a concept we introduce with most groups; but we know that for adults, change at a fundamentally personal level — what Parker Palmer calls the "spiritual" dimension of leadership — comes hard. Still, we are too often frustrated by people whose bad habits and counterproductive attitudes and behaviors slow progress for their team and their community. We need to experiment with

ways to take our work to a deeper level on the personal front.

Parker Palmer gives voice to our intuition in his critique of the Western approach to education that he tea

³⁰ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

project as members of a team and agents of change fits with the new paradigm and its implications.

- "Offer ways of 'reframing' experiences that allow participants to move beyond how-to skills to a level of how this new set of experiences and experiments squares with their picture of themselves." Perhaps we ought to ask: How are you *behaving* differently as an individual leader? How do you *see yourself* differently? In what ways is working with this team a positive experience? How does it challenge the way you see yourself and the work of groups?
- "Ensure that the facilitators model an openness to fear of the unknown and the process of discovery." In our projects, we make plain that we are in a process of exploration alongside participants — that we are not following a cookbook approach to change. We do not, however, tell people that we are feeling vulnerable when we are, that the field is murkier than we expected, that we are struggling to get along as a team of staff people. Our own fears look different in every project, but perhaps we should expose them more fully to our participant colleagues.

In addition to the clues offered by Palmer, we are aware of at least one leadership training program that offers a carefully designed process for peer feedback to participants. No matter how safe and trusting an environment, and regardless of the amount of personal reflection allowed, many of us are unable to see ourselves through the eyes of others.

We see potential value in structuring a safe way for participants in a project — from the same team and from different sites — to offer insights to each other on how they might increase their potential as leaders.

As we experiment with deepening the level of personal transformation for participants, more will be required of us as trainers. We create an implicit contract with participants in our work now: We will coach you, teach you, facilitate your conversations, broker technical assistance for you; and we expect you to produce a strong team and a strong product that will lead to significant change in your schools or community. That sort of contract is far different from one that adds: Our coaching will reach deep, and when we see you falling short of your personal potential, we will let you know. This change is not without risk. People sign up for MDC projects because they want to change their schools or communities, not because they want to change their way of operating in the world. We know other trainers who write the contract this way. Our task now is to learn from them and to coach ourselves and each other to go further down this road than we've traveled so far.

Sustaining the learning community

Through our involvement in the Aspen Institute's Learning Cluster on Rural Community Capacity Building, MDC has explored the question of what it means to be a "learning community." We are clear that for institutions and communities to thrive with the flexibility, intellectual curiosity, strategic vision, and practical stick-to-it-ness that is required in a fast-changing environment, they must become "learning communities" — clusters of people, institutions, systems committed to some core principles. The Aspen Cluster has identified four behaviors of learning communities that are required:

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- instilling a discipline of reflection;
 - creating new patterns of conversation;
 - adopting risk and experimentation in action; and
 - creating new information and new patterns of information flow.

These behaviors and practices are ones inherent in MDC's change work. What we have not mastered is a way to help sustain these practices in communities years after our work is done. Our training processes immerse people into a learning mode; and during implementation, the ongoing convenings and technical assistance provided by MDC keep the process of learning and innovation alive. Many practices begun with our involvement are integrated into the bloodstream of a community — soon not traceable to the MDC-driven project but now "business as usual." That we view as success. Often, however, once MDC's role is more distant, some teams move purely into the mode of implementation, leaving behind the work of intentional community building, ongoing re-visioning and replanning, exploration of ideas from other communities. A pressing question then: What can we do to ensure that our project teams stay committed to practicing the discipline of systematic reflection once they leave our training sessions?

We are in conversation with colleagues in North Carolina and California who are testing approaches to structure "learning webs" formally in communities that have begun collaborative problem-solving efforts. These structures involve a set of interwoven elements including learning "allies" who offer communities an ongoing outside resource for exploration of ideas as well as systems to keep communities exploring the same kinds of

challenges in conversation with one another. We plan to learn from these experiments and test useful practices ourselves.

The telecommunications revolution allows for another avenue for sustained learning, and we are currently building in electronic forums for ongoing discussion among participants in projects who are in sites far from one another. Colleagues with the Aspen Institute and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have been testing ways to encourage learning via "the net," and we are drawing on their experiences as we shape current projects.

Finally, we are conscious of the link between personal transformation and a commitment to sustained learning. Our experience tells us that people learn the most and are inspired to change when they have been touched at a deeply personal level. As we design training efforts in the future and explore ways to deepen the personal transformation of individual participants, we will undoubtedly make progress on fostering the capacity for, but more importantly, the strong commitment to, sustained reflection and innovation in institutions and communities.

