

# Tending the Spirit at KVIE from Middle Management

Bob Justman

In May of 2002 I was introduced to the Path of Contemplative Dialogue (PCD) at a seminar at Mercy Center in Burlingame with 42 other people. I had no idea why I had come to that place at that time except that it appeared to be about improving communication and it seemed like a step I needed to take. Perhaps it was good that I came with no expectations except that I wanted to learn whatever I could. Perhaps because of that I was able to observe and enjoy what turned out to be a truly amazing experience. We sat in a huge (43 people!) circle and listened and talked. One of my memories is of fascination with the ideas that the people in the circle brought up. At times it became chaotic, people even questioning whether what was happening was going anywhere at all. Through it all, the facilitator, Steve Wirth, maintained a calm that I still envy. One of my contributions was a question about how to take whatever I learned back to my company and implement it from a position in middle management. Little did I know how that question would drive me and where that drive would take (and still takes) me!

We spent nearly three days in dialogue on every topic under the sun. In the end, relationships and friendships were created that last until today. Even now, when I see one of the folks we spent all that time with, it's as if we just parted. And it seems like it happened just last week and a lifetime ago at the same time. The memories are so fresh yet so much has happened in such a short time.

I mention that to tell you this – I learned about the importance of community and relationships during those days. It took a time for me to be able to verbalize just what my feelings were as we concluded our time together. Internalizing such powerful stuff for me, a person convinced that I could make it on my own, took time and prayer.

In the mean time, some of the tools of PCD made huge sense to me immediately. For example, I took the Ladder of Inference directly back to my staff and my assistant still carries the graphic on her clipboard to remind her to “check those assumptions”. I remember giving my boss the pages of the manual on the Ladder of Inference and his comment was, “I sure could have used this last week!” I was quickly getting a reputation as a man with a mission – introducing PCD to my company. But no one was beating down my door to learn more.

Even with these small successes, I was still trying to figure out how to bring the feeling of community that I had discovered in Burlingame to the staff members at KVIE. I knew it would make a difference to us and I was going to single-handedly bring KVIE along with me no matter what it took (whether they wanted to go there or not.) And I didn't know how to go about it. It was a very frustrating time.

But the PCD experience (combined with some earlier experiences) made such a difference in me that my behavior changed. People noticed. I was having more impact on the staff of KVIE than I realized.

Then, in May of 2003, a woman named Lori Glasgow from work joined me at a second PCD seminar. She caught the bug. Now I had someone to talk and listen to, someone to share ideas with, someone to help plan how to bring PCD to KVIE.

It was still frustrating...it seemed like forever until we got anything under way. So I said – until I looked in my Outlook calendar and found that Lori and I facilitated our first KVIE Dialogue session on June 24, 2003, just over a month after the second PCD seminar!

A bit about our KVIE Dialogue – it was an idea we had to respond to the continuing complaints at KVIE about “the lack of communication”. I’ve since read on the topic and agree with Margaret Wheatley that the old “lack of communication” thing is really a sign of significant other problems that can’t even be talked about. We were responding to the traditional complaint in a traditional way, however, and decided to offer an open forum for 60 – 90 minutes at lunch time once a month. It was a real education for us to see how much people would open up after just a short time. We had been prepared for long, uncomfortable silences and we had questions ready for when no one had any more to say. We didn’t need any of it. There were silences, healthy silences while people processed what had been said, but never did they run out of things to say. When we finally called attention to the time, people stood around talking before finally going back to work. We were so happy that we could hardly contain ourselves. It had really worked!

So we set to work designing an ongoing program. First we’d talk about how the previous month had gone, where we’d seen discomfort, how we’d met some difficult situation. I built PowerPoint presentations of the various PCD tools to help bring these tools into common use within the station. Then we’d talk about the presentation, and anything else anyone wanted to bring up.

It was quite successful for nearly a year. Then people gradually stopped coming. Only one person really saw PCD as Lori and I did, as a life view, as a way to live. The rest found the respite from the environment extant at KVIE a relief and the tools helpful, to be sure, but didn’t get nearly as much from PCD as we did. But things were happening – the environment at KVIE was changing for the better. For those seeking only respite, there was less and less need. Finally there were only three of us and we decided that KVIE Dialogue had served its purpose for the moment. We put it in hiatus with no regrets. We’d learned so much and had seen so much change at KVIE that it was simply a time to celebrate a success and see what the next challenge would be.

We didn’t wait long. Our next project has been to facilitate a series of meetings to discuss ongoing concerns with our pledge thank you gift receiving, packing and shipping. We included a vice president, managers from several departments and our shipping clerk. We set the normal dialogue rules – one at a time, no comments about another’s beliefs, any topic can be addressed, and say things in a way that doesn’t make others get defensive. It has been a wonderfully productive series of meetings and will continue at 4 – 6 week intervals until there is no more need.

I facilitated another meeting between folks from programming, production, engineering, maintenance and operations regarding the location of various functions within the technical area as we upgrade our facility to digital television. We used the same rules as above with the result

that all present learned new things, and numerous assumptions were put to bed. In this case, I had no role other than facilitator since I belong to none of the departments involved.

Telling this story has been extremely valuable for me since I was quite concerned that we had not made a lot of progress at KVIE. Looking back has made me see that the progress we have made is nothing short of miraculous. A past employee was volunteering and visited me yesterday. She said that the environment feels different, that people seem happier. What a testimony!

How to make a difference from middle management? Find a friend and keep plugging. Never give up the faith. Always be open to concerns to see if you can help. Be cheerful – be a friend – hold a door open – pick up something dropped. You never know what act of kindness will turn a person's day around. Once a person starts smiling, that person is more likely to listen and give another a break. Be what you want to see around you – why should anyone treat you well if you treat them poorly? And be patient.

The Path of Contemplative Dialogue has changed (and continues to change) my life. Stay tuned!

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