What? So What? Now What?

John Lubans Jr.

The title is shorthand for the "debriefing" process used in team building activities. Whenever I debrief a group in my workshops or classes, I try to get answers to those questions.

I've discovered there are people who take life literally; metaphor is largely lost on them. For some a candle is a candle, a lump of wax. When lit, the candle provides light. For others, the lit candle is that and more. The flickering light can represent life; when quenched, an ending. These literal and figurative views are far apart. To narrow that gap between workshop participants, I've learned to be as explicit as I can be about why we are doing an activity and what might be gained. I take time to explain what the participants will be doing at the literal level, and I ask them to be alert to the levels of interpretation beyond the literal, the *What?*[1]

The *What?* is the activity itself, a summary of what happened. For example, for the Egg Drop, the *What?* could be this: Our four-person group wrapped, in ten minutes, a raw egg with twenty straws and a yard of tape and then dropped it from a height of five feet. Our egg broke. While the *What?* is fact-based, eye witness accounts may differ vastly and can make for a rich, if limited, analysis, about differing perspectives.

The *So What?* is what you learned about yourself and others from the activity. What did you—yes, you—do? Waited for others to make decisions? How did decisions get made? Did your ideas for wrapping the egg gain acceptance or were they rebuffed? If rejected, did you assert yourself? Did you or someone else take charge? Did anyone protest? If the egg broke or did not break, does it matter? Was the group ethical?

The *Now What?* is what you derive—the takeaways—from the group activity to apply to your life and at work. They are yours to take or leave. If you were uncomfortable with what happened, will you do things differently? If your ideas were ignored, will you assert yourself? If someone commandeers a future group, will you protest? If you believe a group is dishonest, will you say something?

Being explicit during the lead-in to an activity helps groups engage; it helps break the ice. Without this prior glimpse of the activity, you run the risk of the clueless remaining so. Some people, when unclear as to what their role is, will not go with the flow. Instead, they will behave in a defensive way. Or they will go along like corks bobbing in a stream going nowhere in particular.

For example, a colleague and I did a team-building presentation to a couple dozen research library directors. Our introduction was minimalist—we were less explicit than what I would now regard as best practice. To illustrate team development, we had them do the "group juggle." It involves four tennis balls—everyone has to juggle the balls in a set order in the briefest time possible. More than a few of the directors were mystified about what they were to do; not only that, they had little idea how what they did could be linked to team building. Some jeered at the activity as so much foolishness. Maybe they only wanted or needed more information.

When presented with an unfamiliar task, we do not want to appear foolish, to lose face—all the more so if we are "afflicted with office" as Oscar Wilde once said. On hands and knees, in suits, trying to figure out how to best juggle tennis balls in the quickest time is vastly different from a comfortable position behind a desk surrounded with a multitude of other real and implied exaltations of office. If we are used to directing others, having to do the task with no clear leader can lead to confusion or a stalemate.

In this case, the several groups got over their initial misgivings and began to offer ideas, to experiment, and to learn from mistakes; they made good progress. As I recall, some of the most reluctant participants had their "ah ha!" moment and made insightful transfers from the activity to the workplace. These directors may have realized that, just like they had difficulty at first from a lack of information, so might their staffs back home. And, while these directors struggled, they meant to do well. Would their staff behave any differently?

John Lubans Jr. (lubans1@nc.rr.com) of Durham, North Carolina, teaches, writes, and consults about leadership.

So, how many clues to give people ahead of an activity? The less you reveal, the more uncomfortable the participants, but that discomfort may precipitate valuable insights. The more you reveal, the more certainty in the group, but this cushioning might shortchange participant learning and runs counter to the real world's uncertainty.

A group's failing can be a powerful moment for reflection; yet most groups want to succeed. They take failure as a personal affront—their group somehow did not get the job done—rather than as a normal group outcome on which to build and get better. This fear of failure—our national affliction?—affects facilitators as well. We are tempted to bend the rules so at least one group can succeed and claim victory. It's anticlimactic when no eggs survive a drop. There may appear to be little to debrief, but, if we can get out from under the so-called failure, then we might have a healthy discussion about how we worked or did not work together to protect the eggs. That may lead to a candid conversation about what promotes or gets in the way of workplace success.

Diagnosing the Debriefing

As already stated, I now lead off activities with thorough explanations. I try to make sure everyone understands the rules, knows what the game is, and knows what the end result should look like.

Yet, after that effort and a practice round or two of the activity, I run into situations where the learning is avoided, where self-illumination is short-circuited. The question then becomes whether the group is unable to learn from the activity (the participants do not want to learn) or whether the activity has no learning to offer (the design is inept, inapplicable, or incomprehensible).

I recall one facilitator who ran an activity for library department heads. It was something that took group effort, touching, and a willingness to work with each other. Well, the group failed at the activity. During the debriefing, the facilitator candidly said "your failure is diagnostic." It was exactly how these department heads worked with each other on the job, protecting their turf rather than improving the library at large.

I agreed, but one person took exception to the term *diagnostic*. No way, for her, could a failed activity suggest the group's dynamics in the workplace. The two arenas were separate. Yet the facilitator had sat in on department head meetings and simply was noting that the workplace dynamics did not change during the activity; just as mutual support was missing on the job, so it was in the activity.

While the facilitator was blunt in his assessment, the group was not open to his interpretation or to improving. So, while these simple activities may confirm the issues in the organization, participants may resist making the connection from play to work. They deny the link and never get to the *Now What?*

The big challenge for the facilitator is to reveal the truth so that the group learns about itself. The mistake this facilitator made was rubbing the group's collective nose in what was already known—they did not get along, and they were okay with that as long as no one trespassed on *their* turf.

At times, a workshop group is so dysfunctional that nothing less than disbanding the group makes sense. However, as we know, many organizations will mask their weaknesses and pretend they are trouble-free. The dysfunction is much more difficult to conceal when a group takes part in a workshop built on active participation, rather than passive listening. Often a diagnosis based on small group behavior may be highly accurate about what needs doing if the organization *wants* to improve.

Frankly, I've come to regard my experience at one library as a nightmare—something I should have run screaming from in the opposite direction. But, as is often the case with an outsider, there were few clues to suggest the troubles in this library—nothing to give me an early warning. Instead, as the day wore on, and I mean *wore on*, my apprehensions piled up.

My first outdoor activity—it was a crisp sunny morning—was the "rope push." Instead of pulling the rope, like a tug-of-war, each side was to figure out how to surrender the rope to the other side. Out of the blue, one of the participants ran off with the rope! He stood some fifty feet away, leering, like a delinquent child all but sticking his tongue out. I was of two minds: give pursuit or sprint to my nearby parked car and head home! I did neither.

Abandoning the group would be akin to a captain of a sinking ship jumping into a lifeboat ahead of the women and children. Flabbergasted, I failed to call time and have everyone analyze the *So What?* That discussion, if honest, could have been eye-opening. I suspect, given the group's subsequent behavior, no one would have been bold enough to say that hijacking the rope was a typical outlier behavior for this individual. From a cursory understanding of this library, I noted a few major service point redundancies that suggested a long-term failure to resolve uncooperative behavior—avoidance and accommodation drove this library's decisions. If you stop to consider the monetary costs of this behavior and the lost opportunities for new services, you glimpse the tip of this budgetary iceberg.

Next, we did a group game involving tossing balls into boxes that required cooperation between four groups of internal and external customers. The goal was clear: Achieve the highest level of customer satisfaction. One of the participants, Team Y's captain, suggested her team cooperate with an adjoining group. Quite sensibly (and following the suggestion in each captain's cheat sheet) she said to her team, "If we get Team X to agree to move their boxes closer to us we'd all have greater customer satisfaction (more balls in each box)."

Remarkably, the team captain was ignored and the two groups would not cooperate—so customer satisfaction

was abysmal. Did they behave this way on the job? I asked this question in the debriefing and got a few noncommittal answers.

Looking back, I fault myself in part for this nadir in my consulting experiences. The communication, the design, the planning, and the location all could have been better. And I could have done a better job facilitating. If I could do it over (my own *Now What?* moment), I would stop the group and give them feedback on what I was seeing. If my observations were ignored or judged irrelevant, then I'd walk away. From a diagnostic aspect, their behavior pointed to real issues that were largely taboo. I was seeing a perverse organizational personality more than an incompetent workshop design. However, the latter always applies to some extent in workshops that *gang aft agley*.

Another example of the diagnostic value of small-group activity came my way after a team-building workshop. It's been my custom to e-mail participants two weeks later asking them to let me know what they learned. Usually a few respond. I got a Harry-Potter-owl-post "howler" from one participant, someone I did not expect to hear from because she visibly had disengaged herself from the group and looked, as P. G. Wodehouse might have put it, like an aggrieved vegetarian served up a plateful of bratwurst. Unbeknownst to me, she was paying attention, or at least enough to confirm in her eyes the hypocrisy of this library:

> What I picked up from the workshop was the reminder that there are people in the world who believe the end always justifies the means, and that breaking the rules is no big deal. We were given a set of rules by an authority figure (you). . . . When it proved to be a more difficult task than people had anticipated, one or two began lying and cheating so they could "win." Others followed suit quickly, once they realized the authority figure (you) weren't going to penalize them for the behavior. . . . What resulted was mob mentality, and a hollow victory. In the summing up, the people who had decided for all of us that breaking rules was okay spoke louder and more than those of us who were appalled by the behavior; I still don't understand what your purpose was that day.

I've forgotten what I wrote back to her, other than to say I was sorry for her experience. To be sure, I was dismayed that what needed to be said never got said. I do recall elaborating that day about the ethics in this game—every group breaks the rules to improve customer satisfaction—but no one spoke up about how repulsive not abiding by the rules was for some or, for that matter, how some arbitrary library rules (think the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules here) beg to be broken. I doubt the discussion would have been as candid as the howler e-mail. The boss was in the room, and from what I could gather, my unhappy correspondent was describing her boss.

With more time we might have had the quintessential confrontation between the staff and the administration; a clearing of the air. But a one-day workshop is rarely enough time for an extrapolation of what is really bugging people. We'll get allusions to what's wrong, hints of an undercurrent, but rarely an open discussion. Trust takes time. And if the group does not regard trust worthy of pursuit, or does not respect any other viewpoints besides the "official line," no matter how much time you have, candor will be missing.

To my correspondent's credit, she no longer works in this system since landing a job elsewhere. I like to think that her *Now What?* moment may have been precipitated by what happened in my workshop. Then again, her passive aggression may be her normal way of dealing with conflict.

In a past column, I mentioned one of my most dreaded workshop participants: He-Who-Has-Been-Sent to repair—miraculously—some deep flaw in his personality.[2] The person arrives bearing a grievance, a chip on their shoulder—not against me necessarily, but against their boss, their organization—and, of course, the grudge plays out in a variety of ways. Some sit silently nursing their resentment for having to be in the workshop; others try to sabotage the workshop—participating only to undermine it, looking for loopholes in the rules, denying, like Aesop's dog in the manger, the experience for themselves and for others.

On occasion, a dissatisfied participant will make an oblique reference to something not being quite what they thought it would be. If this comes at the end of the day—say, during a go-around in which each participant talks about what they will do differently after this day—there is usually too little time to probe their meaning. Still, to get full value from this *Now What?* moment, I probably should ignore the time pressure and ask a clarifying question: "What's behind your statement? Can you tell me more?" then wait. One intervention like this probably will not take too much time, but exceeding the stated end time may frustrate participants who have worked hard during the day and are eager for a break.

Debriefing at the end of each activity during the day has limits as well. Some people, like my aggrieved participant, will let their hair down in writing but say nothing unflattering onsite. I've noted this difference between classroom debriefings and written reflections in my classes. While all was sunny in the classroom—Great teamwork! Terrific cooperation! Everyone participated fully!—the written reflections done a week later never failed to show a contrast. Many students felt much freer to express themselves privately than to take their beef public.

At the start of each semester, I make a point of assuring my classes that each team member has the power to stop a group and to say what is on his or her mind—there

continued on page 149

39. Peter Hernon, Joan Giesecke and Camila A. Alire, *Academic Librarians as Emotionally Intelligent Leaders* (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2008): xi.
40. Ibid., xii.
41. Ibid., 135.
42. Leanne E. Atwater and David A. Waldman, *Leadership, Feedback and the Open Communication Gap* (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008): 2.
43. Ibid., 3.
44. Ibid., 101.
45. Stephen Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007): xxii.
46. Ibid., xxiii.
47. Ibid., 211.
48. Annie McKee, Richard Boyatzis, and Frances Johnston, *Becoming a Resonant Leader* (Boston: Harvard Business School Pr., 2008): 1.
49. G. Edward Evans and Patricia Layzell Ward, *Leadership Basics for Librarians and Information Professionals* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2007): x.

ChangeMasters All *continued from page 130*

support it and the university libraries. At the same time, he says, "Don't over-plan. Do be flexible," for there is never any way of knowing when or in what form an opportunity might present itself.

And, of course, keep a sense of humor. Stevens notes that librarians are often overly sensitive and preoccupied with the image of their profession, to the point where they become the stereotypes that they reject. His advice, in this as in most other matters involving self-importance: "Lighten up!"

References

1. Norman D. Stevens, "The Catalogs of the Future: a Speculative Essay" *Journal of Library Automation* 13, no. 2 (1980): 88–95; "Looking Back at Looking Ahead, or The Catalogs of the Future Revisited" in *Information Technology and Libraries* 17, no. 4 (1998): 188–90; and "Research Libraries: Past, Present, and Future" from *Advances in Librarianship* 17, ed. Irene Godden, (San Diego: Academic Press, 1993): 79-109.
2. Norman D. Stevens, "The Molesworth Institute," *ALA Bulletin* 57 (1963): 75–76; "The Fully Electronic Academic Library," *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 1 (Jan. 2006): 5–14.

An Unexpected Fundraising Success *continued from page 132*

- Provide appreciation with food treats for all callers and gifts for the top caller.
- Thank parent donors and provide occasional follow-up communication.

It is expected that a library will want to tailor its approach to best fit local circumstances. However, the general plan can work to significantly benefit any academic library.

References

1. Available through the McGill Alumni Online Community at www.martlet.mcgill.ca/?id=MjQxNA= (accessed Jan. 2009).
2. The parents fund webpage at Purdue: www.purdue.edu/udo/path_parents/parents_fund.shtml; at Loyola: library.loyno.edu/about_us/giving/parents_annual_fund.php; at Amherst: www.amherst.edu/give/parents_fund (accessed Jan. 2009).

What? So What? Now What? *continued from page 142*

won't be a penalty from me for doing that. At least one team did stop and reflect, all for the better, but for the most part the confidences went no further than between the student and me. Regardless, the student's private realization of a problematic group dynamic was still important. I always coach each student—this is after all, his or her *What Now?* moment—to consider what they would do differently. What would they say? Some, I believe, did confront themselves and now resolve differences in a more open and satisfying manner.

P.S. For dog lovers and readers of this column, Bridger, the black lab is back! My daughter's National Guard unit is away for a year so B is here and teaching me new tricks: communicating with one's tail; never forgetting to show appreciation for current, past, and future kindnesses; and finding the joy in doing your job, any job.

References and Notes

1. For a useful discussion of facilitation techniques see Michael A. Gass and Cheryl A. Stevens, "Facilitating the Adventure Process," in *Adventure Education: Theory and Applications*, ed. Richard G. Prouty, Jane Panicucci, and Rufus Collinson (Beverly, Mass.: Project Adventure, 2007) 101–23.
2. John Lubans Jr. "'Thank God and Greyhound, She's Gone,' (to a Workshop,) and Other T&D Matters," On Managing, *Library Administration & Management* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2007) 35–37.