

2005-2006 Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows

Report on Workshop 4 • December 3 - 7, 2006

Hartland, Vermont

The first snow of the year fell on the eve of the Fellows' arrival. This was the fourth and final workshop of the second class of Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows' two-year venture but many Fellows preferred to view it as a beginning – the beginning of a life-long journey together as colleagues and friends. The workshop theme was “Embarking”.

Applying the Fellowship toolset of vision, reflective conversation and systems thinking to a practical sustainability challenge, Fellows integrated their experiences and assimilated their learnings via a combination of interactive, solo and reflective exercises.

Peter Senge (long-time Sustainability Institute colleague) had challenged the Fellows at their first workshop to “build their capacity in the creative-orientation,” rather than the problem-solving orientation. This culminating workshop provided Fellows with the opportunity to apply everything they'd learned towards this challenge in a series of new exercises we labeled Sustainable Systems Day.



Following a four-step process Fellows used visioning to articulate what they want in their sustainable world, systems thinking to outline the system dynamics of their visions, and then descriptions of the structures, mindsets and beliefs that would have to be in place to support those visions. Facilitators divided Fellows into topic areas: Forests, Agriculture, Oceans and Fresh Water.

Step one: Fellows came up with a vivid vision of health and sustainability for their topic area. Participants used words, colors, drawings and pictures to describe their visions.

Step two: Fellows described some of the conditions that would have to be met for their visions to materialize. Certain “stocks” (resources or pollutants) would have to be maintained at a certain level over generations. What are they? What replenishes and what drains them? What information flows are necessary to keep these in balance?

Step three: Applying vision to the structures and beliefs that would allow the stocks to persist at desired levels, Fellows envisioned not just what the oceans, forests, agriculture and fresh waterways look like in a sustainable world, but what the laws, rules, policies and incentives would have to be to make this vision possible. Beneath that, they envisioned what people would believe, their mindsets, to make them happy to live with such laws, rules and incentives.

Step four: Fellows then examined the implications for their own work in regards to the conditions for sustainability that they had envisioned.

A richness of what a sustainable future could look like came forth.

The oceans group came up with the idea of fish-nets that would double as filters for pollution. The fresh water group came up with the idea of “watershed nations.” As the name suggests, these are national boundaries designed around watersheds. This group also came up with the idea that products report on the “river-ready-ness” of water used during their production.



In the final exercise of Sustainable System’s Day participants shared quick images of the sustainable worlds they had been working with:

The breast milk of mothers everywhere is free of toxins; no human-being is illegal; rituals of gratitude are a regular part of our culture; all of us have young people working side by side with us - we trust and call on their creativity; you can drink the water; zero waste; the patent offices are closed because they acknowledge that the 3.85 billion years of evolution hold all the patents we need; we honor and respect our local communities; as your president I announce an 8 year, \$100 billion bill to make the US energy independent; an Earth Bible; no road-kill; fresh fixed up barns still owned by farmers in Vermont; all people everywhere contributing to the sustainability effort.



Fellows’ effectiveness is THE leverage point for bringing about their visions of a sustainable world so the second day and a half were dedicated to integrating the lessons learned. Interactive exercises, coaching and structured solo time enabled Fellows to reflect on the ways they’ve grown and changed in the course of the Fellowship, acknowledge developments they’ve seen in each other and set new intentions going forth. Traveling back in time, Fellows reviewed their experiences over the two-year Fellowship from the moment they read the application.

During their solo, each Fellow reflected on what they learned about working for sustainability – specifically what they learned from their experiments in the “learning cycles,” introduced in the first workshop (design strategies → act → assess results → design strategies). In coaching groups Fellows described those learnings and acknowledged growth in each other.

On the final day, during a series of exercises, Fellows outlined what their intentions and next steps for creating a sustainable world would be. An interactive exchange with several others gave Fellows the opportunity to refine their vision, their next steps and the support they would need.

A Transition Ceremony marked the end of the formal Fellowship. With a reunion already planned for July in Montana this second cohort of Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows embarked secure in the knowledge that a new phase of their fellowship had just begun.

The Fellows Program created impetus to set objectives for my learning; and it helped to kick around some difficult topics in a trusting environment. I rediscovered the passion for work and environmental quality with some good practical tools acquired along the way!

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