

Surfing the Waves of Change at UC Santa Cruz

By Ken Homer, Founder, Collaborative Conversations

The scene is familiar to many. Top management announces a reorganization. Several departments will be consolidated into a single entity to eliminate redundancy and save money. The mantras of “working smarter” and “doing more with less” appear in the official announcement, but strangely there is little substance to be found in the rest of the memos coming out of the executive suite. No discernable plans or practical suggestions for how to shrink and restructure the organization to meet the goal of being leaner and more effective. In fact, after the initial announcement and a few short follow ups, information about the consolidation slows to a trickle and then seems to cease altogether. Department heads start eyeing those who work for them with an evaluative gaze that makes everyone queasy. An atmosphere of anxiety develops. In the vacuum created by the lack of information rumors take root and begin gnawing away at people’s confidence. The question on everyone’s mind, “Is my head on the chopping block?” starts to affect performance.



Such was the scene several years ago when I received a call from the ombudsperson at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Due to budget constraints, it was determined that each of the separate IT departments that served all the different Colleges within the University would be consolidated into a single entity to save money and streamline service. As she told me, “If we don’t do this right, I’m going to have way too much work on my hands trying to sort through all the complaints. You claim to be able to tap into the intelligence of groups; can you help us through this transition?” Not fully grasping the complexity of the task, I cheerfully said, “Sure.” And thus began my involvement in one of the more challenging projects I’ve ever worked on.

The first thing we did was to bring all the department heads together in the same room. In hindsight this makes sense, but at the time it was a radical act. Never before had all of these people met each other and talked together about their work. Silos are as much of a fixture of the operational landscape of universities as they are in private sector organizations. We decided we needed to get people aligned as quickly as possible, but that we couldn’t simply jump into the nitty-gritty details of the project. We needed to devote time to building relationships and trust first.

We identified four key questions to help bring order to the unruly project and we posed those questions in a World Café format – people worked in groups of four or five and rotated to new tables with new people after about 40 minutes of talking. Since we held several rounds of conversation everyone had the chance to meet everyone else by the end of the day.

“Why do you work here?” led off the questioning. These were accomplished IT professionals living within commuting distance of Silicon Valley. The lure of money was strong and quite close by. Their answers struck resonant chords among everyone in the room. “This is my alma mater and I love this school.” “I believe that a world class

education is the best thing we can give our children, and while I'm not a good teacher, I'm a great coder. Knowing that my coding is helping kids learn is worth far more than money to me." "I support a Nobel Prize winner and I want to make sure he has the best IT possible." And, since it was Santa Cruz, we also had several replies of, "I'm a surfer and I need to live by the beach."

At the end of this inquiry, the atmosphere in the room was warm and welcoming, a far cry from the nervousness and suspicion that was present an hour earlier. People were visibly relaxed and more willing to engage in conversation. That was good because we knew the next question was going to be tough to work through. "What are your biggest concerns about the consolidation effort?"

Immediately, each table began to buzz with intensity. Brows were furrowed, expressions of concern and worry appeared on many faces. People sketched out notes on the paper covering each table. Lists were generated, heads were nodding and shaking and the round ran longer than expected. We repeated the same question in a new configuration with much the same scene being played out. When we finally harvested the room, asking people to call out their top concerns the resulting list was daunting.



"Yikes!" was the first word that the three of us running the meeting spoke to each other as we looked over this massive list of concerns. Suddenly there seemed to be a chill in the air. We had gone from a room full of people bound by common aspirations to a room full of people experiencing significant anxiety over shared concerns. We knew we needed to bring them back to where they felt that they had access to resources if they were to find a way to cope with all the things that were keeping them up at night.

"What do you do that is world class, that needs to be baked in to the new IT organization if it's to be successful?" Again people leaned in closely. Within a few

minutes the air was positively charged. Laughter was heard here and there. Smiles appeared, and you could tell by their body language that people were once again connected to their strengths and were discovering hopeful possibilities for their future. This round also ran over from our expected time and we generated a long list of “must haves” that the new IT organization would require if it was to be a worthy successor to the existing departmental structures.

“Now, given all that you have learned here today, what question or questions do you have, that, if answered, would allow you to take the next steps in restructuring your department?” This round began with silence as people made notes to themselves and thought through the complexities of their department. Slowly their voices filled the room as more and more people joined in the conversation with their tablemates, amplifying, cross pollinating, and clarifying core questions.

The harvest from this question filled up an entire sheet of mural paper some four feet high and eight feet wide. It was a bit overwhelming and not entirely useful in its present state. “Here are four dots. One red and three green. Place the red dot next to the question you deem to be the most pressing, the one that if answered would let you take your immediate next step. Then use the green dots to identify those you judge to be the three next most important questions. Then take a break – you've earned it!”

The resulting map now showed 16 questions with clusters of red dots, indicating the immediate next steps for exploration and clarification so that people could begin to plot a path to make the transition. The green dots gave a ranked order to the remaining questions. Those with no dots, while still important, represented things to be addressed further out on the time horizon.

In the space of a single day, using just four questions, 28 people had come together and drawn up the outlines of an approach to a highly complex project that would take over two years to complete. No single person could possibly have pieced this together because the knowledge was distributed among the whole group. People were tired but pleased. One woman summed up her experience of the day as follows:

“When I heard we were going to hold an all day meeting I almost called in sick. When I saw all the concerns, I felt physically sick. When I saw what we do that's world class I thought that we might actually succeed. When I saw how we sorted the questions into a workable timeline I knew for sure that would could do this and do it well. I don't think I've ever worked harder in one day, but I don't think I've ever been more proud to be part of a team that I didn't even know I belonged to until today.”

