

Love and Discord: Creating Passion Through Leadership

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Abstract

How can a social innovation enhance diversity in ways that maximize its social benefits and minimize its social costs? This challenge was explored in a dialogue series convened from 2018 to 2020, where highly experienced network designers and facilitators (or “netweavers”) explored how to maintain lively, generative innovation communities. This paper provides advice from the netweavers in their own words, combined with my commentary on their ideas for benefiting from diverse membership and building and maintaining connection within social innovations organizations that may have limited face-to-face interaction. I first explore how to bring love to your leadership by engaging selflessly, telling the truth, and cultivating a mind and body connection. I recount how the netweavers engaged in ritual, storytelling, and other creative techniques for enhancing intuition and imagination, and how they maintained brief personal connections that were individually tailored to their community member’s needs. Second, I explore how to embrace diversity and disruption. A creative community contains many kinds of diversity, and these differences are useful for innovation work since they cause people to question and broaden their ideas and assumptions. I recount the netweavers’ ideas about how to weave this capacity for creative disruption within a culture of safety and reassurance without letting things get too comfortable and complacent. They concluded that social innovation communities should not cultivate consensus, but rather should create an environment where people see each other as legitimate participants and feel safe to share their differences.

Keywords: social innovation, netweavers, storytelling, diversity, creative disruption

Introduction

Effective social movements and social innovation organizations rely on strong interpersonal ties that align individual interest with collective interest. This requires rich, sustained personal interaction, in which members develop relationships, cultivate a common language, knowledgebase, and practice, and see that their commitment is matched by the commitment that others are making to the shared effort.

The Covid-19 crisis struck directly at our organizations capacity to support close interaction, and even as the crisis abates an increasingly virtualized society appears here to stay. Organizers and facilitators of geographically dispersed social change learning networks have long struggled with this problem, since they have limited opportunity to bring their members together to develop close relationships, outside of annual meetings and occasional learning exchanges and trainings.

However, between these often costly and logistically complex events network members are usually physically isolated from other members of the network and performing everyday work that is not on the network's innovation agenda.

Network designers and facilitators – or “netweavers” - have tried to address this problem through remote connection, such as webinars and online communications platforms. I have often heard inexperienced netweavers frame this issue by saying, “If we could only identify the right online platform, and get people to use it, we'd have a powerful and effective network”. However, my experience with many networks had led me to conclude that this search for the best platform is usually a fools' errand, motivated by living in an era where social networks are often touted as a potential replacement for direct human interaction. What I have seen is that no matter how hard they try or what clever technological tools they adopt, online interaction is often shallow and uninspired, and participation generally wanes. Online forums only support “weak ties” (Granovetter 1983) that are insufficient to support collaborative innovation, no matter how well designed they are or how much effort goes into maintaining them.

Equally, an uncritical embrace of diversity can also lead an inexperienced netweaver astray. Diversity is not only associated with the vital goal of promoting social justice, promoting diversity is useful because different ways of thinking among people can be a boon – diverse teams tend to generate more insights and be more productive (Page 2008). But diversity is not an unalloyed good for a community's well-being. Political scientist Robert Putnam, who wrote “Bowling Alone” (2000), noted that more diversity in a community is associated with less trust both among and within ethnic groups. Putnam noted that the negative influence of diversity encompassed attitudes and behavior, bridging, and bonding social capital, and public and private connections. Using a term that resonates with the Covid-19 pandemic, Putnam (2007) suggested that people of all races, sex, socioeconomic status, and ages “hunker down” and avoid engagement as diversity increases.

Putnam made it clear that his purpose wasn't simply to provide a counterfactual to a widespread and uncritical embrace of diversity. As he wrote, “It would be unfortunate if a politically correct progressivism were to deny the reality of the challenge to social solidarity posed by diversity. It would be equally unfortunate if an ahistorical and ethnocentric conservatism were to deny that addressing that challenge is both feasible and desirable.” Putnam suggested that diversity not only leads to better outcomes, but it also breaks down social divisions to eventually give way to “more encompassing identities” that create a “new, more capacious sense of 'we.'” For Putnam, the key issue is not how social innovation organizations enhance diversity, but instead how these organizations enhance diversity in ways that maximizes social benefits and minimizes social costs.

This paper provides some tangible ideas for how to address both issues in the service of social innovation: how to 1) enhance relationships within organizations that have limited face-to-face interaction, and 2) how to get the greatest advantage associated with the organizational diversity. These ideas are organized into two summary recommendations:

1: “Bring love to your leadership”

This kind of love is about engaging humbly, telling the truth, and cultivating a mind and body connection – it doesn’t mean sharing intense feelings and deep affection. Two ways to express this love are emphasized: engage in ritual, storytelling, and other creative techniques for enhancing intuition and imagination, and maintain brief personal connections that are individually tailored.

2: “Embrace diversity and disruption”

A creative community contains many kinds of diversity, including personal identity (e.g., race/class/gender), professional expertise and role, types of knowledge, and geographic origin. These differences are useful since they cause people to question and broaden their ideas and assumptions. The trick is to weave this capacity for creative disruption within a culture of safety and reassurance. Tension can be a productive force which you need to maintain until the time comes when you need to “shake up the soda” and let it come bubbling out, as one netweaver put it. Another way to nurture difference is to guide your community to craft a core story that supports their ability to tell many different stories. This may sound contradictory, but a creative community is never smooth and unified – as one netweaver suggested, it should capture the spirit of what Walt Whitman (1855) wrote in his poem, *Song of Myself*, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.”

In the following analysis, I further unpack these two recommendations with commentary and selected quotations from the netweaver dialogues.

Methods

The insights presented in this article series were principally derived from three online dialogues that I convened on Zoom on November 15, 2018, March 3, 2019, and May 9, 2019. In each of these 90-minute dialogues highly experienced netweavers discussed the challenges of building and maintaining change-making networks.

The first of these dialogues focused on how to facilitate relationships in a network that only occasionally meet in-person. Participating netweavers and their organizations were:

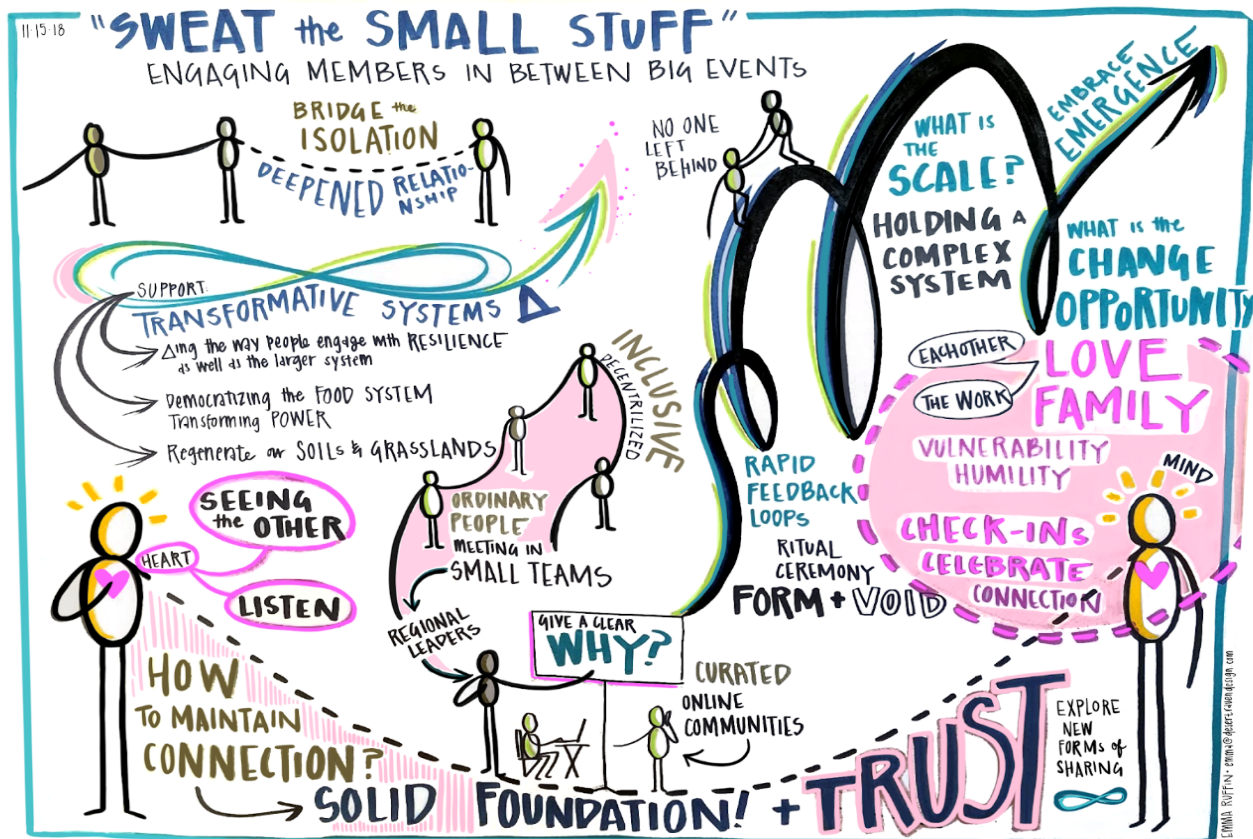
- [Abbey Smith, Director of the Savory Global Network, Savory Institute](#)
- [Curtis Ogden: Organizing team of Food Solutions New England](#)
- [Michelle Medley-Daniel: Director of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network](#)

The core questions I asked the netweavers during this dialogue were:

- When we aren’t all together as a network, how do we engage our members to create and sustain deep connections, which are so critical to the success of our efforts?

- What kinds of interaction can we facilitate in between our infrequent, complex, highly engaged network convening?
- What kind of regular, everyday interaction gets us closer to creating and maintaining that social movement energy, with deep connection, common culture, and a shared commitment to the transformative agenda of the network?

Below is the visual record of this dialogue:



Graphic by [Emma Ruffin](#)

The second dialogue focused on how a network's organizational culture could support change-making. Participating networks and their organizations were:

- [Karen Hardigg](#): Coalition Director of the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition
- [Lalo Bone](#): Manager of the Cuba Oceans Program at Environmental Defense
- [Gail Francis](#): Strategic Director of the Re-AMP Network

The core questions I asked the netweavers during this dialogue were:

- What features of network culture are associated with the social change capacity building?
- How can we cultivate a transformative network culture?

Below is the visual record of this dialogue:



Graphic by [Emma Ruffin](#)

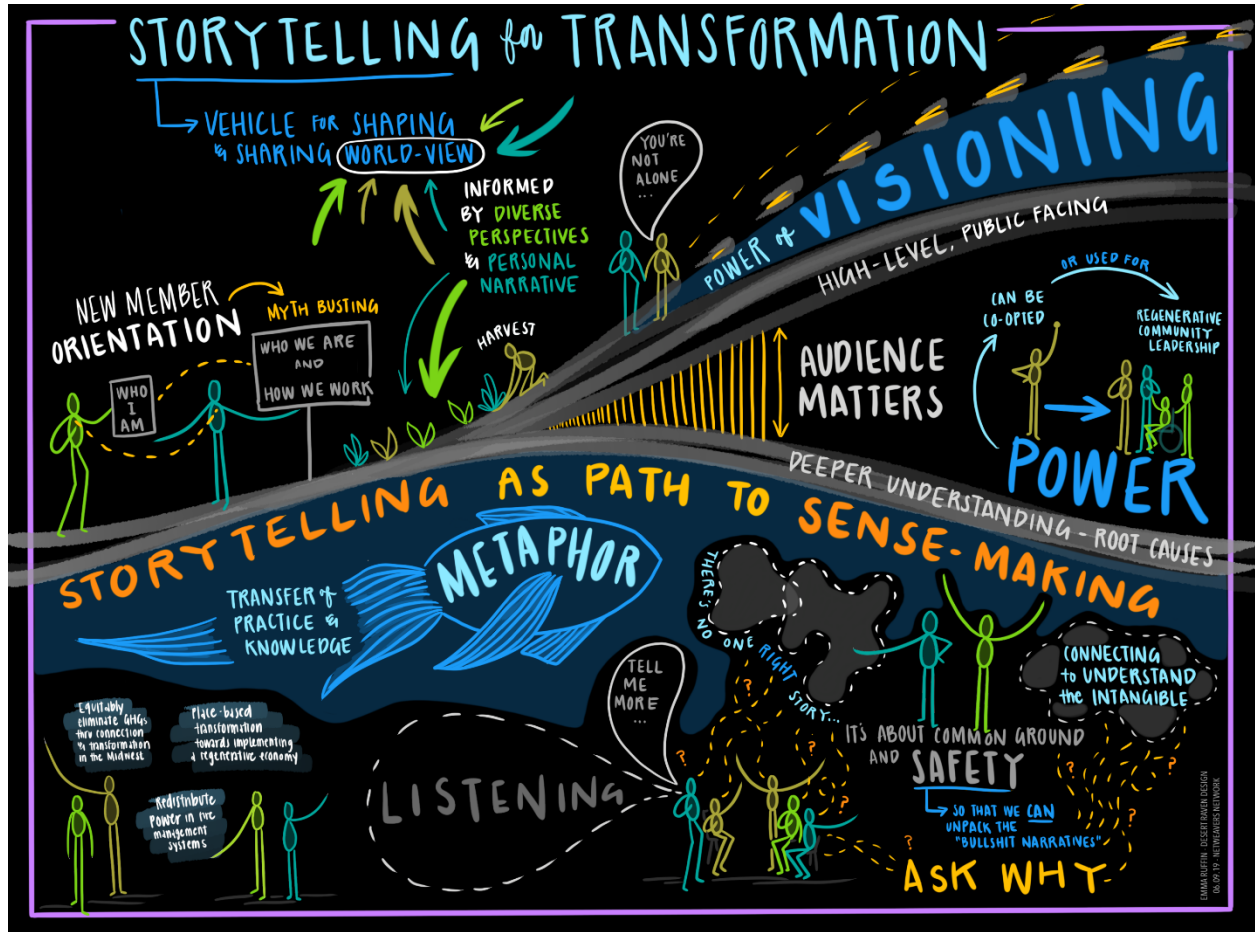
The third dialogue focused on the role of storytelling in networks. Participating networks and their organizations were:

- [Gail Francis](#): Strategic Director and [Sarah Shanahan](#): Director of Community Management, of the RE-AMP Network
- [Stuart Cowan](#): Founding Convener, Regenerative Communities Network
- [Michelle Medley-Daniel](#): Director of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network.

The core questions I asked the netweavers during this dialogue were:

- How do netweavers support powerful storytelling?
- What kind of stories do networks tell?
- How can we assess whether storytelling is useful in fostering change?

Below is the visual record of this dialogue:



Graphic by **Emma Ruffin**

In addition, some of the insights presented in this article were derived from the other seven dialogues convened between 2018-2000 to explore how to maintain lively, generative networks, which are described in Goldstein (2021).

Participants in each dialogue were sent follow-up questions to stimulate additional ideas and reflection. The dialogues were recorded and transcribed, and the transcription and responses to follow-up questions were coded and analyzed using **Delve** content analysis software. Analysis of individual cases was guided by grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) with an emphasis on identifying emergent themes and insights (Law, 2004). This article contains the principal ideas from this analysis, along with direct quotations from the participating netweavers, which were edited to enhance their clarity and enable them to stand alone in this format. These edits were limited to changing tense or pronoun and removing elements characteristic of verbal speech (e.g., phrases like “um” and “well”).

Bring love to your leadership

Lead from behind, and when the time comes, let go of control

Love is a willingness to be in the background, not the spotlight:

- “If you are going to enhance love among the membership, you need to be humble and vulnerable, which models these behaviors.”
- “You have to have zero ego in this.”

In practice, this is often about sharing leadership, or even stepping away from leadership entirely:

- “We’re trying to introduce more and more power sharing into the network by occasionally totally letting go of the reins and asking them to lead. I think that is one of the important ways to keep the love going.”
- “At our annual workshop we scraped the whole agenda on the last day and all staff deliberately left the room. We said, “Go for it, talk to each other about what we’re achieving - or not- and how you want things to move forward.” We did this because we didn’t want to have our staff power dynamics in that conversation. We left it to them to sort out.”

This isn’t something that the netweavers advise doing early-on in your community - rather it's about letting go of control when your organization is ready for it:

- “In my network I’m having a preview of what it's going to be like to be an empty nester. Just a little bit of sadness – Oh, the kids have grown up and it's really cool.”

Tell the truth about yourself and others

Love is about being open to seeing others as they are and accepting what you see:

- “Love is about learning, understanding, and accepting and holding space for other people. It's about learning about yourself and other people.”
- “Chilean system biologist Umberto Maturana said that the definition of love is seeing the other as a legitimate other.”

Love is about sharing what you are seeing, even if it hurts:

- “Love is cultivating the ability to tell one another the truth and be courageous.”
- “The loving space can be a bold, courageous space that can create love and not just a “warm fuzzy”. A certain amount of truth telling is important, it’s a demonstration of love, like, “I trust you and love you enough to give you the truth.” That can counterintuitively fuel the love.”

Appreciate the whole person

Love is supporting people as whole persons:

- “Love is the ability to see each other holistically and hold the complexity of others and ourselves.”
- “Love means holding the complexity of ourselves and others and holding up that full complexity, since what we're doing is systems work and the system is us.”

Love is feeling connected to the whole:

- “Having a holistic context helps me - it is a statement about what we most deeply desire in life. When I feel connected to my context, I feel enduring energy and I feel a kinship with those in the network. It's hard to describe, it's like coming home. I deeply enjoy my work; I respect the people that I get to work with, and I believe in what we do. For me, this creates the conditions for me to be able to give - to give love.”

Love is in part the work you do together and in part about personal relationships:

- “It's about loving each other apart from the work, and it's about loving the work - those things are connected.”
- “We see each other as people who share this work and share this purpose. That helps to sustain us because even if you lose touch with someone or haven't had any interactions with them lately, you know that they're out there and still engaged in the work that you're doing.”

Invite in the whole person through rituals, art, and dialogue

Create a safe and welcoming space where people feel comfortable and needed:

- “Our role first and foremost as facilitators is to be good hosts. Being a host means you create a loving space where people feel welcome. It's like you are inviting someone into your home. This can extend into other practices, like making space to ask one another how they are and meaning it, not just as a pleasantry.”

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Make everyone a part of the dialogue:

- “We have a check that we do each meeting that we call the "PIES check-in". Pies, stands for physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. We want to know because your well-being matters to us because we are in some ways only as good as your well-being. And so that kind of caretaking, you just see it viscerally in their response.”
- “We do lots of storytelling and really deep connecting, creating space for full bodied engagement, head, heart, spirit, body. And I realize that that's not everybody's cup of tea. And some people may be resistant - there always are resistors. But I think once they

realize that their full selves are welcome, they rediscover parts of themselves that feel valid and validated.”

Develop a shared connection and purpose using rituals and art:

- “Do you have a place for ritual, do you understand that sort of regular practice? What ails mainstream society is a loss of ritual that can invite some contemplation of sacredness and connection.”
- “At the beginning of our last meeting we had storytellers and then a poet. And the poem had a lot to do with how what we need to do is bring back ceremony and how we're going to connect through ritual.”

Maintain your remote relationships through brief, highly personal exchanges

Maintaining remote connection is best done through highly personal connections that reaffirm the relationship:

- “It's like reaching out to a friend. We need to bring more of our personal lives instead of "We're whole people when we're together but then when we're away, it's just business".”
- “Rather than just talk about strategy, which can be more of a drain, we need to get people more connected and have a flow of love, of care, of “I see you”, “I have you”, “you are totally welcome”, of generosity, of hospitality - those are some of the practices at a level of individual and group that are creating regenerative potential.”

Do not try to make every relationship operate in the same way:

- “I think that there is always a range of relationships. Some people you click with around a certain set of ideas, other people might have a similar way of thinking and you can talk big ideas with them, others, you might share a bond around a specific narrow thing with, and others are just not as deep.”

Know how often you need to connect with people to maintain your bond:

- “There's an interesting thing about latency and what kind of period you have between when you might interact with someone. And I think it's different with different relationships and different people. There might be people that you can pick up right where you left off a year or two later. For other people, the connection is more frequent. The emphasis is less on, "This is the content that connects us" and is more about, "On a human level, I feel connected to you".”

These connections can be very brief:

- “What if we tried to bring all of our whole selves in little manageable tiny bite sized pieces to our connection?”
- “It’s not like I have to stop the flow of my everyday life to participate in it - I can just share little tidbits of where I am. And I can receive a little tidbit, so we're still connected. And then when we get together, it's effortless, we can take it to the next level and dig deeper into the things that matter when we're in person. It's not a feast every day, because that would be too much, right? It's the simple little things.”

Maintaining these connections is not just a technique – you’ve got to really feel it:

- “I approach all of these connections as relationships rather than as “work tasks”. I’m always trying to connect and allowing myself the full range of ways to do that are not purely professional. Learning about members’ families and remembering the names of their partners and kids is a way I show I am listening and care about them. And I genuinely do care about them and feel like that is my job. If I had strict work/personal relationship boundaries I don’t even know how I would approach my job. I’ve never been a person who keeps those aspects of their life separate and I think that helps me do this job better.”

Embrace diversity and disruption

Engage many kinds of diversity to generate productive friction

Seek difference in your community:

- “We make space for lots of people to avoid the danger-zone of having a very exclusive group that doesn’t make space or does “othering”, which negates the love.”
- “We have to have difference in the system, otherwise we get stagnant. If you don't have the relationship between diverse perspectives, then you're not going to have an adaptive strategy.”

Difference comes in many forms:

- “One of our strengths has been that we have individuals who are taking similar functional roles and approaching them in very different ways.”
- “Combining different kinds of knowledge can create a more holistic knowing that is integrated, practical and useful.”
- “Sectoral diversity juices the network in terms of its learning and systemic awareness.”

Operate within a pluriverse, balancing diversity with unity

Seek the Goldilocks effect: neither too little diversity (which can be stultifying) nor too much diversity (which can cause chaos):

- We know that too much diversity can create chaos and inefficiencies. And we also know that lack of diversity can create brittleness and a lack of systemic intelligence. Those are extremes, of course. Diversity and efficiency occupy different ends on a spectrum of vitality.”
- “We are trying to celebrate difference and have people get to know each other through their differences and be curious about differences, as well as trying to help people who are like-minded work together effectively.”

Maintain this beneficial tension by supporting an organizational culture in which everyone doesn’t come from the same background or have common goals or values:

- “We work with fishermen and we are all working towards the same vision. But fisherman have different resources, they fish these resources differently, they live in different places. So, part of what we’re trying to do is to find that common language. Even if they are doing different things, they all convene in one single vision.”
- “There are elements where we’re trying to create shared culture, and elements where we specifically don’t want shared culture because we really value the learning that comes from cross-cultural friction.”

One netweaver described this middle ground as a pluriverse, where you could reap the advantages of both diversity and unity:

- “The philosopher William James described the world as a pluriverse – a plural collection of things, somewhat connected and somewhat not. In a pluralistic framework, nothing includes everything or dominates over everything.”

A pluriverse can have a common core story, with many individual variants:

- “A pluriverse is a world of many worlds, where there can be many, many stories. We don’t need to have one definitive story that we bring but we can bring many stories and many initiatives can coexist and play off each other.”

You can help your community craft a core story that supports a pluriverse – an example is the marriage equality movement:

- “The freedom to marry movement, which is decades long, had many iterations towards its goal. But there needed to be a winnowing down of the core narrative to focus on love.”

You can set initial conditions for your community to coalesce around a core story:

- “Create space both for the tremendous diversity of the different vibrations we’re working in, as well as creating from coordination and coherence.”
- “The early conditions that are created by the convener bring some initial coherence to the disparate parts and give it a powerful channeling purpose.”

Your storytelling process should contain the potential to generate different stories:

- “If your story doesn't have the potential within it to lead to diversity, to get to a place of much more generous sharing, then it doesn't achieve the abundance, it doesn't evolve.”

This idea brings up an example from my research on the U.S. Fire Learning Network (FLN), which is led by The Nature Conservancy and the USDA Forest Service (Goldstein and Butler, 2009, 2010). The FLN's goal was to reorient fire management toward ecological restoration and community protection, drawing together fire practitioners from dozens of fire-prone landscapes around the country. FLN's weavers guided managers in each landscape through a planning exercise that guided each of them to write a story that began before European colonization, when both indigenous and naturally ignited fires maintained healthy forests. In each of their landscapes, they told a story about how fire suppression throughout the 20th century brought on ecological decline and raised the risk of catastrophic fire.

Positioning themselves at the low point in the narrative arc, fire practitioners chose to stop being complicit through inaction and to develop a plan to heal their landscapes and protect their communities. These fire stories were plurivocal – they were as different as each landscape's ecological and social conditions, and each provided very specific guidance for local management. Yet each narrative drew on the same core narrative of a heroic fire restorationist reversing generations of decline and restoring a lost harmony between humanity and the natural world. This common core fostered a sense of community across a far-flung network.

Nurture your productive disruptors and maintain generative tension

Too much mutual support can kill creativity:

- “The risk is that in order to have that high level of trust, what we often do is to try to agree with each other as much as we can and support each other and show that we respect each other. We're creating some homophily you might even say - an echo chamber at the extreme.”

Trust-building activities may be at odds with the need for disruptive ideas and personalities who question assumptions and push against groupthink:

- “Most of us emotionally need a place where people can come and reassure each other so that they can work together effectively. Well, it turns out you also need this disruptor. And so how do you effectively weave that capacity for disruption when you also genuinely need a culture of safety and reassurance?”
- “Sometimes you need to use a conflict to help illuminate the reality that there is conflict.”

You need to cultivate and protect your disruptors:

- “Disrupters break up the flow and exchange, introduce different languages and assumptions, even interfere with relationships. They are not going to be well-liked.”
- “It is important to dissent and still belong.”

While your disrupters might be a pain in your group’s collective ass right now, they often turn out to not only be useful instigators, but also valued members of your community:

- “Disruptors are those who are fundamentally opposed to some key aspects of what you are working on, but they see enough value to show up and take abuse for a few years until people were willing to say, “He’s got a good idea.” So that’s why it’s important to be willing to say, “Hey, let’s hear again from the person who everybody thinks has a bad idea”.”
- “Almost all of those people who have stuck it out and become ultimately respected and insiders and are now part of this trusted collaborative started as disruptors.”

By deliberately creating safe opportunities for people to express strong emotion or even conflict your community can develop confidence that they can get through future conflict:

- “Disrupters build the collective muscle of the group by pushing people beyond their comfort zones”.
- “We use conflict as a chance for self-reflection and getting to a much deeper shared understanding. Then we may agree, okay, let’s do this prototype and let’s do a parallel one and play with both. They’re both viable things and we don’t even have a way to evaluate which one is the “best one”, we just will try both and learn from both. We use conflict to say, “Let’s fork the software”, try multiple pathways, and then continue to learning and get back to productive action.”

However, do not try to resolve every conflict – while tension may reduce your organizational effectiveness during normal times, during crisis it can be a source of new approaches and ideas:

- “Where things are a little more floundering because nothing’s aligned and coordinated. It’s like shaking up that kind of soda. At some point you decided it’s time to unscrew the cap. And there’s an energy that’s built up for the change to happen and you can’t quite control, you don’t know exactly how it’s going to play out.”

You need to make sure the disruption does not get out of control and need to know the difference between productive and unproductive disruption. You need to course-correct or even remove people who are dragging you and the community down, whether by interfering with productive exchange or not following through on their commitments:

- “You don’t reward bad actors in your system.”

Conclusion

To enhance its potential for social innovation, a community should be both loving and familiar and a place where diversity and disagreement thrive. To achieve this seemingly contradictory outcome, you need to model the kind of loving relationship you want your members to share while cultivating people who keep things from getting too comfortable. These ideas are in tension – your goal is not to cultivate consensus, but to create an environment where people see each other as legitimate participants and feel safe to share their differences.

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