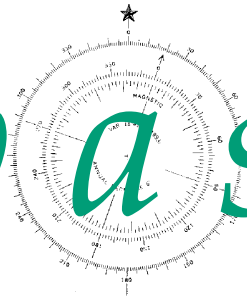
SPECIAL: Idiocracy Issue!

True North project guidance strategies *www.projectcommunity.com*

Compass



VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3, FALL 1999

Idiocracy

"id i ot (id'e et) n. [>Gr. idiotes, ignorant person], "Webster's New World Dictionary.

It starts small. A brief post-meeting conversation. "Hey, can you BELIEVE her attitude? She doesn't have a clue!" "Yeah, I know. It's not my job to tell her it's stupid. She clearly doesn't want my opinion anyway!"

Then, the escalation. "She has a real attitude problem. This is so obviously stupid. She has to know!" "She is so smug. I think she's hiding something." "I tried to talk with her about it, and she was clueless. There's just no helping some people!"

Then it spreads. Someone asks, "What's up with your project?" The reply, "Oh, we've got this idiot project manager with a seriously BAD attitude and lots of stupid ideas." "I can't believe they made HER a project manager. If I was running this project..."

Enter the Idiots:

Has anyone not been the target of such idiot making? Idiot making happens when we're certain of the meaning of someone else's behavior. You were smiling, so I know you weren't really serious about your request. You are always quiet, so I decide you don't really care about the project. I ask pointed questions, so you conclude that I'm negative about our project. If I don't do what you expect, you'll treat me like I'm an idiot. I'll get even by reciprocating.

Everyone is vulnerable to idiot making. Sponsors are as vulnerable as project managers. Even team members are threatened. My expectations for you start the nasty game. Belief in absolutes - the 'right' decision, the 'right' way, the 'right' answer -- is idiot making's seed. The more I expect you to be absolutely 'right', and the more I expect perfection, the more I guarantee our mutual idiocy.

..."the more I expect perfection, the more I guarantee our mutual idiocy."

Each of us must be an idiot at some level. We can't know everything, so we have to be at least partially ignorant. I am ignorant of what goes on inside of you and you are ignorant of what goes on inside me. I can only ever see a situation from a finite number of view points. The possible perspectives that I cannot hold are infinite.

So, what do you do when someone interprets your behavior in an unkind way? What do you do when you think you are being made the idiot? You could retaliate and explain to them why they are the real idiot. Or, you can welcome the idiots -- yourself and everyone else. You might even admit to being clueless and accept others as being clueless, too.

When you suspect someone of making you into an idiot, admit the awful truth. You are one! You can't NOT be! So, since it's true anyway, why not just act as the idiot you are? Say, "I don't know." Ask "stupid" questions. Be foolish. Do the unthinkable -- reveal what you expected and what you observed. Disclose how

Continued on Next Page...

CONTENTS

Idiocracy 1
David's Notes 2
You Don't Understand 2
Appreciations 3
Community Isn't Tidy 3
Notices, About Compass 4

...Continued from Prior Page

you feel -- whether angry, frustrated, or, especially confused. Then, listen to the other person's story. Talk about the meaning you make and its significance to you. Finally, honor the other person's meanings and feelings. It will probably be different from what you thought. You may not be able to understand it, either.

Understanding that you may never be able to understand is a key feature of being an effective idiot. When I accept my ignorance and accept yours too, I can be informed rather than defined by our differences. I lose the need to judge -- myself and you -- and with it I lose my need to make you into an idiot, too.

In the final analysis, each community is an idiocracy, a confederacy of dunces. The idea that we must appear wise keeps us from really being wise. Accepting our mutual idiocy makes us the wisest possible community. aas

David's Notes

See the new, expanded Web version of David's Notes at:

http:www.projectcommunity.com/whatsnew.html- This issue's topics:

1. **New Folks in the Community**,
2. **The Recipe for Doing the Impossible**,
3. **Compass via Email**,
4. **Problem Solving Leadership Workshop and Change Shop Dates**,
5. **True North's New Website**,
6. **Ordering This Isn't A Cookbook and**
7. **Facinating Links**

Understanding That You Don't Understand

"Our similarities bring us together but our differences help us grow." Virginia Satir

"I have an issue I'd like to discuss with you," announced Tom. I was about to learn that I had offended him. He wanted resolution.

I quaked inside as he shared his story. His perception of my behaviors left him with strong conclusions. I asked some clarifying questions, hoping my vulnerability didn't show too much. I learned later that Tom felt equally vulnerable. We engaged as two brave knights, battling while terrified on the inside.

Tom was looking for cues to tell him that I was sincere, but the cues he was looking for were alien to me, ones I could only unconvincingly display. I, too, was looking in places that Tom never goes for evidence that Tom really understood.

..."we accepted the possibility that we were agreeing, even though our senses could not confirm it."

We finally managed to connect, but not in the way we expected to. With generosity, we accepted the possibility that we were agreeing, even though our senses could not confirm it. We did not understand, but our ability to accept each other's story about the meaning of our behavior set the premise for a real connection.

This is real community.

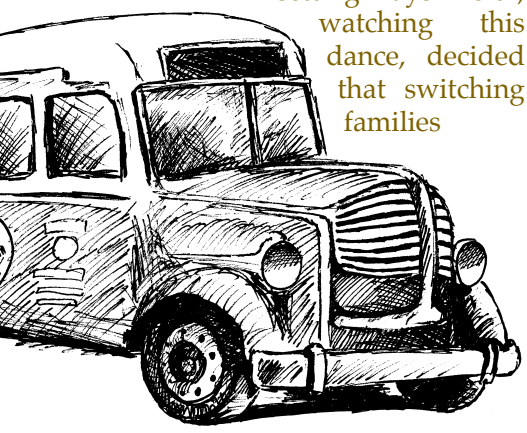
Understanding That You Can't Understand

My daughter, Heidi, recently returned from a six month student exchange experience in Chile. Recounting her experience, she described arriving in Santiago. Watching out of the window as the bus carried her from the airport, it was clear to her that she didn't understand what she saw -- stray dogs, tin roofs, ancient buildings, grey sky -- but she remembers feeling confident that she would understand, given a little time. She thought to herself that as a reasonable person she would naturally understand after a time.

The longer she stayed in Chile, however, the more she came to recognize that she was understanding less and less. As she learned about and experienced the culture, each new observation brought another layer of curiosity into focus. This was upsetting. She struggled for weeks to find some reasonable toehold, becoming increasingly frustrated at her inability to find one.

She learned that many exchange students switch families because of such "troubles." The "problem" family has rules that don't make any sense to the reasonable student. The transferring student inevitably finds that their re-

placement family is also strange -- in different but often equally upsetting ways. Heidi, watching this dance, decided that switching families



wouldn't resolve her mystery.

She finally concluded that the problem was with her notion of herself as a reasonable person. At home, in Oregon, she shares thousands of invisible cultural cues with other natives. This makes her judgment sound and her perspective reasonable. In Chile, however, this same perspective is skewed, leaving her out of sync with the norm. She was seeing everything through her Oregon eyes, making what was perfectly reasonable for others into something that just didn't feel right to her.

The resolution, she observed, could not lie in understanding the curiosities around her, but in appreciating that she could not (and would never) understand them. She started her journey observing the world through Oregon eyes and returned to see Oregon through more worldly ones. das

Appreciations

Antoinette Z. Hubbard for the Bellah quote!

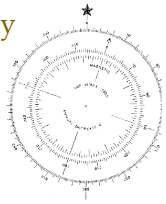
Tom Fahey for confronting me with his concerns.

Eileen Strider for demonstrating how to do conflict extraordinarily well!

Steven J. Chihos for the warm welcome!

Jennifer Pierce Zahnizer for joining us on the adventure.

John Anthony Schwab (and Louise and Carl) for reminding us of life's potential.



Community Is Not Necessarily Tidy

The pursuit of common understanding is both beside the point and, gratefully, unnecessary. I can acknowledge and appreciate differences without understanding them, as Heidi discovered, and I'm probably better off accepting this fact.

Our differences only become a problem when we believe they are a problem. Our differing perspectives are probably our greatest strength, although they can destroy us if we insist.

I recently attended a Friend's Community meeting. This meeting crushed my idealized notion of how Quaker meetings are run. I expected quiet, efficient agreement. Instead, consensus was hammered out in as upsetting a manner as any I've seen. Some disconnected while others railed about the process, while still others tried and failed to enforce the time limit and agenda. Still, consensus was achieved.

Great communities are not conflict-free. Rather, as Robert Bellah suggests, "Community is a group that does conflict well." Conflict is inevitable in this world where we cannot understand. Because of this, our ability to avoid conflict cannot define our greatness as a community. What we do when encountering conflict defines our greatness.

"Community is a group that does conflict well" Robert Bellah

The job of coming together to accomplish meaningful work is complicated to the extent that each feels they must understand every other perspective. This is a particular trap for the project manager, who might innocently assume that it is their job to define the correct perspective. Equally complicating, they might believe that they should be the resident "Rosetta Stone," responsible for translating all behavior into something understandable in each local dialect.

It is a fundamental error to try "bringing the community together" at the beginning of the project. The purpose of the project is to converge toward a common point over time. If we have to start together, sharing a common perspective from day one, we unnecessarily frustrate our start-up.

This is the first and most important project community lesson.

You don't understand.

You won't understand.

This is not a problem.

This is the foundation of Project Community.

Understand? das

Notices:

Understanding that you don't understand might require some learning. Enroll here!

True North pgs' Mastering Projects Workshop Open Enrollment Schedule

January 24-26,2000

March 13-15, 2000

See our web site-

www.projectcommunity.com for online registration and the most current schedules!

About *Compass*

Compass is published bi-monthly by *True North pgs, Inc.*, and is distributed free of charge to a project-oriented community.

Compass is a navigation tool for continuing your process of improving product delivery. *Compass* shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective leadership to yourself and to your project's community. We enable each other to improve the quality of our project experiences through sharing our stories and our insights.

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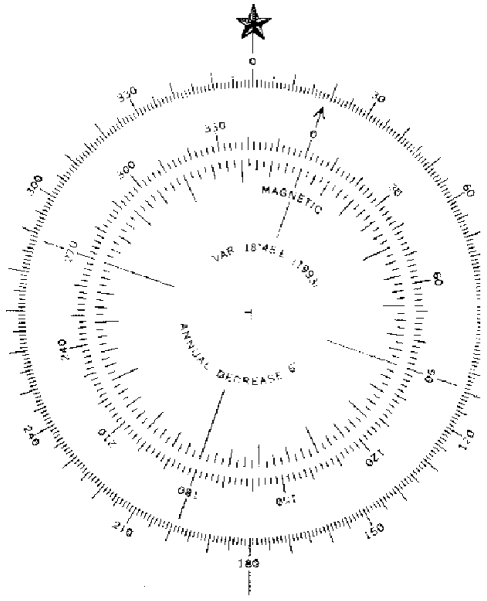

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