

Collaboration: The Big Picture

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Abstract

A new magazine, *ICOSA: Connection and Collaboration*, began publication in September, 2008. Dedicated to promoting community partnerships and collaboration of all types, its publisher and editor explain further the importance of collaboration and the vision they have for a new era of cooperation among agencies of academia, business and community.

Interview with Gayle Dendinger, Founder and Publisher, and Jan Mazotti, Editor, *ICOSA: Connection and Collaboration*



Jan Mazotti, Editor of ICOSA

While public libraries tend to lead the way in understanding and connecting with the larger communities they serve, all types of libraries could benefit from having a deeper understanding of the needs, interests and developments of our communities. Collaboration involves not only partnering with other libraries and librarians; it means connecting in important ways with other persons, groups and agencies within the broader community. A new magazine began publication in September, 2008, devoted precisely to understanding and promoting collaboration on every level of society.

With this in mind, Collaborative Librarianship sat down with the Founder and Publisher of *ICOSA: Connection and Collaboration* magazine, Gayle Dendinger, and with Editor, Jan Mazotti. One would be hard-

pressed to find more enthusiastic ambassadors for wide-scale collaboration.

Gayle Dendinger, CEO of CAP Logistics, an international heavy weight freight carrier, and Member of the Board of Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado at Boulder, is Founder and Publisher of ICOSA. According to his article in a recent Leeds newsletter, http://leeds.colorado.edu/About_Leeds/interior.aspx?id=2170, Gayle "would like to see Colorado become the collaboration capital of the world."

Jan Mazotti serves as Business Development Director for CAP Worldwide, the international division of CAP Logistics, and is Editor of ICOSA. Jan also is a Board Member of the Alliance for Quality Teaching and for Colorado Performance Excellence, two organizations in Colorado committed to improving education and management through collaboration, innovation and continuous improvement.

CL: Visually, ICOSA is an impressive looking magazine. Even more impressive is the mission and scope of ICOSA in promoting and expanding connections among community agencies to create a better world. Could you expand more on what the publication really hopes to accomplish?

Gayle: The magazine operates on the principle of A – B – C, that is, the principle that upholds the value of bringing together in meaningful partnerships academia, business and the community. Everyone who is successful knows about collaboration and knows instinctually how to bring people together to achieve a common purpose. There are amazing successes in collaboration, and one objective of the magazine is to bring these stories to our readers in hopes that they, too, will be inspired and motivated to become involved, or more involved, in collaboration that benefits us all. Essentially, the magazine presents case studies in how individuals and groups work well together in creating a better world.

Jan: The magazine was started because we had a desire to create a mechanism for sharing stories of the amazing efforts and successes in collaboration and to cause people to think more creatively and more widely about collaboration. With this in mind, we decided from its inception to produce theme-based issues. This first issue, September-October, 2008, was on the general theme of collaborative innovation and continuous improvement for world class success. That issue introduced readers to some important creative and collaborative thinkers and doers in the area of process improvement. The next issue, November-December, 2008, was on corporate social responsibility, followed by the January-February issue on education and workforce development. The current issue deals with sustainable development and issues concerning energy use and production and the environment. The issue at press addresses matters concerning global trade. Other themes on the horizon include “conscious capitalism,” collaboration for the common good within the sports world, and the big ideas of Nobel prize winners that can bring people together and change the world.

CL: What does the name ICOSA mean?

Gayle: Actually, the term comes from the Greek word, eikosi, meaning twenty. But to

explain further, in my article, “Buckminster Fuller: Crazy or Genius” printed in the inaugural issue of ICOSA, I described Fuller’s interest in exploring the interrelationships of nature and complex systems, whether a single organism, an organization or a society. He was fascinated by the five platonic solids, particularly the tetrahedron consisting of four faces that are equilateral triangles and the icosahedron with 20 equilateral triangular faces. Fuller is best remembered as the creator of the geodesic dome, a remarkable sphere-like structure made of a complex network of triangles. Having a different way of looking at the world, he designed an icosahedron schemata called the Dymaxion Air-Ocean map to depict the earth’s continents with minimum distortion when projected or printed on the planes of the icosahedron. Based on this representation, he came to see that cooperation was the optimum survival strategy. His belief was that we could accelerate evolution in directions that yield a minimum of disconnects. And so it was Buckminster Fuller who inspired the name of our magazine, ICOSA: Connection and Collaboration.

Jan: The icosahedron symbolizes the connections and interrelations within society as well as the unity and strength of these bonds. The mission of the magazine is to advance collaboration for the good of the human community, and as such, the magazine presents the stories of people coming together and working together in productive ways.

CL: How have your expectations for ICOSA been met so far?

Jan: So far, we have greatly exceeded our expectations. The magazine is far more advanced than where we thought it would be at this point. Our staff embarked on this project without much experience but we have learned a great deal in a short period of time. We saw a need to promote and expand collaborative initiatives in more intentional ways and it has been amazing to see the enthusiasm the magazine already has generated. People all over the world have

been so supportive. They know the importance of collaboration and they want to tell their story. Now they have a good mechanism to do so.

Gayle: The accomplishments of the magazine over the past year and the groundswell of support it has generated have been phenomenal, really beyond belief. Part of the success is that we consult with our partners at every stage of production and planning. The challenge now is how to keep going at this pace. But it is easy to engage people because of the theme—they understand building connections, and now that we have some issues, the sell of the magazine is really quite easy.

CL: There must have been some defining experiences for those involved in the creation of this magazine? What is the nature of some of these experiences and how did they factor into bringing about ICOSA?

Gayle: One pivotal experience for me occurred on “9/11.” The attacks that took place that day caused me to realize in a new way the power of collaboration. The terrorists were able to perpetrate this heinous crime because of effective collaboration on a massive scale, but their intentions were for evil. I began to think how much more we could accomplish for good if we learned to collaborate more extensively and effectively.

When my daughter, Rebecca, was sixteen, she drew a pastoral scene with trees, a stream and flowers. On the bottom she added the inspirational words of Margaret Mead, “Remember that a handful of people dedicated to a cause can change the world.” I loved this picture and had copies made on stationery. On September 10th, 2001, one of the people in our office found a copy of this stationery and, unbeknownst to me, laid it on my desk. As the events of September 11th unfolded, I made it to work to find that these words in front of me had a whole new meaning. The magazine, inspired in part by Mead’s words, represents one of our efforts to change the world for good.

Another pivotal event was a trip to South Africa. In 2002, our company, CAP Worldwide, specializing in international transportation services, was participating in a breakfast meeting in Denver with then mayor Wellington Webb. The purpose was to discuss and plan a trade mission to Africa. At the breakfast we were approached by a lady about sending to South Africa about 200 pounds of books for some library. This small request eventually resulted in CAP Worldwide actually delivering over 30,000 pounds of books to 41 schools and libraries in six townships throughout South Africa. A number of company employees, including Jan and myself, also made the trip and then spent three weeks living in these communities.

Jan: I remember from this trip one day in particular. Gayle was walking over the hill and down to the school when 2,500 students spontaneously broken into song expressing their appreciation for the books we had delivered. It was amazing to me to realize that something as simple as a book could actually change lives. This could not have happened without it being a collaborative effort of many people, and it truly was a life changing experience for me. I was struck by how much we were able to do, and realized then how much more we could do from our position of luxury, wealth and opportunity.

We still receive letters from those students on the importance of the books. In fact, some of those students are now at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls at Henley-on-Klip in Meyerton, South Africa. It is a matter of helping to change for the good one life at a time.

At one point during the visit, we were introduced to the aged Mama Majorla, a wise woman who has helped apartheid protesters (terrorists to some) escape from the police. She has the story telling ability of Uncle Remus, Aesop, and Bill Cosby combined. Through her parables, she taught us that, while none of us can do it all, each one could shine a light in our corner. I will try to do this the rest of my life.

This experience also caused us to realize what truly is of value and what the priorities should be in life. We are reminded that we are all one, and that we have to figure out how to work together more effectively, to help out each other and to help make the world a better place.

CL: What do you believe to be some of the big challenges in collaboration today?

Jan: One big challenge is to present the case for collaboration to people who just don't get it. Trying to explain collaboration is tough, especially when it is so basic and fundamental to our thinking.

Another challenge is remembering that collaboration is not "agreeing." In fact, you can agree on something, but still not collaborate, and vice versa. Collaboration consists of inviting into decision-making and into action the ideas and resources of others. It is a matter of understanding the value of a wide range of opinion, talent, and skill to achieve a common good. Agreeing is a mental state while collaboration involves action that gets things done.

Time allotment and management are further challenges in collaboration. The agendas of managers and workers tend to be packed full, and since collaboration takes a great deal of time, one may think time is just not available. However, we must make the time. Collaboration increasingly needs to be a priority, and not an option, especially if we wish to work more effectively and more extensively.

Gayle: There are two additional barriers to collaboration of which to be aware: our egos and the fear of losing control. We need to be conscious of the ways our self-interest and self-centeredness can thwart collaborative efforts, and also be conscious of how subtly we desire to control things. Both these psychological states can so easily cause collaboration to come to a screeching halt.

I am reminded of the Beatles song that says, "the love you take is equal to the love you make." With collaboration, you will never be short-changed on the effort you expend because the multiplier effect is astonishing. I have found that one key to overcoming the barriers is to "transmit" to others that you are a collaborator, that you are one who builds connections and one who draws people into the processes of planning and of doing the work.

At any rate, overcoming the barriers to collaboration is well worth the effort.

CL: What words of caution might you offer an agency embarking on a new path in collaboration?

Jan: As Gayle suggests, check the ego at the door. It is about the collaborative and not about you! Actually, I do not suggest one should approach collaboration cautiously. Do it boldly! Throw caution to the wind, if need be. Be adventuresome. Go for it! When you seek to maximize people's talents, when your goal is to do the greatest good for the greatest number, what have you really to lose? The potential benefits far outweigh any risk.

Gayle: From time to time, one may encounter those who for some reason may wish to hijack collaborative efforts for their own purposes. You do need to be careful in selecting the persons and organizations as partners. Since this emphasis may be new to some, collaboration may be regarded with suspicion by the "old guard" that appeals to tradition and the way things have always been done. Also, I have found that people who have power tend to not share this power readily or willingly, and since collaboration is not about power, it may be tricky working with this type of person. The key, though, is to be willing to learn, to rethink and to regroup.

In developing collaborative partnerships, it also is important to be sure that the players are truly committed to collaboration. Some individuals purport to be collaborative, but

really they are not. As well, some project and plans, belying the jargon, may not truly be collaborative. It is important to discern what actually is collaborative and what is not.

To be sure, we have faced certain frustrations. In our work, we encounter a lot of people with a lot of good ideas, but far too often those ideas that hold promise of viable solutions to problems end up being merely “white papers.” The tendency sometimes is to get bogged down in studying, in participating in think-tanks, and so forth, without every truly changing anything. What we really need are “do-tanks.” In our company, and through the magazine, we are developing a “do-tank” program that collaborates with academia, business and the community.

CL: Western societies have embraced the notion of competition as a fundamental driving force in the creation, development, and expansion of goods and services in most sectors of life. We see this in politics, religion, education, business, health, and so forth. Do you see the emerging emphasis today on collaboration to be a radical shift, and is it truly a fundamental change in our social constitution?

Jan: Yes, I believe collaboration represents a radical shift. There have been small pockets of activity where collaboration dominates, but generally, in western societies this is a new way of thinking about how we live and work together. You see this fundamental shift occurring in the conversation among business managers and other leaders in the public and private sectors where partnerships and cooperation are the new themes. Who knows where this ultimately will lead? Hopefully it will catch on in a much greater way.

Younger people seem to grasp the importance of collaboration much more readily than those of the older generation, as well as folks in non-profit organizations. But even in non-profits, much more could be done through better collaboration. For instance,

how many organizations in your community work on improving literacy? By my observation, duplication and redundancy exists within these programs, but how much better use of time and resources could be realized if all the organizations conducting literacy programs coordinated their efforts?

Organizations in the west could learn a lot about collaboration from eastern societies. The Chinese, for example, engage in collaboration very effectively, whereas in the West we still tend to be very “siloed.” Asian societies seem to more readily achieve a shared vision for community and country, whereas in the West we are more driven by egoism. Increasingly, larger solutions to larger problems will need to be found, and wrestling seriously with sustainability issues will require collaborative initiatives.

CL: Libraries have played an important role in various societies for hundreds of years, perhaps even saving Western society from complete collapse during the Medieval period. How do you see libraries today, as integral to a free and open society, participating in this new emphasis on interconnection and collaboration?

Jan: Libraries will participate in this groundswell of collaboration by thinking outside the box. Like other organizations, libraries need to embrace great ideas and then create the mechanisms to make them happen.

The information age has brought about a glut of materials and resources and libraries, now more than ever, should be seen as the repositories of reliable, quality information. Libraries, it seems to me, are all about access, about finding the right information regardless of where that information is actually located. When our organization has work with libraries, we have always found them to be very supportive of our efforts to expand collaboration. We see libraries as strong partners in collaboration.

Gayle: In my view, libraries play a key role in the betterment of humanity. Recently I

came across a book that identified the top 100 things that have changed the world. Number one was Gutenberg and the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. Number three was Bill Gates and the development of the personal computer. Printing and computers are integral to libraries today, and so it stands to reason that libraries will continue to play an important role in personal and community development all over the world.

Jan: With the shift in emphasis today from traditional print materials to electronic, I expect there are new challenges in providing access to digital resources, but I suspect libraries will be able to meet this challenge best through collaboration with other libraries and with the creators and purveyors of digital assets. Libraries also serve a role in helping people move more and more into the digital age. It is alarming when you see the budgets of libraries being cut and services reduced as this threatens a vital component of our communities.

CL: From the broader world of business, government and management, what insights about collaboration could you offer libraries that are rethinking, or embracing for the first time, their mission and operations in terms of collaboration?

Gayle: In our dealings with various sectors of society, it became clear to me that there are four types of entrepreneurs: business entrepreneurs, social, political and educational entrepreneurs, and they are all rethinking their missions and operations in terms of collaboration. I would encourage library leaders to do the same.

ICOSA, we hope, is one new mechanism that will advance collaboration. In fact, we are working right now with universities on using the stories we publish as case studies that can be used in business and management courses.

Jan: The particular mechanisms for collaboration occur by overcoming linear thinking and by embracing creativity and lateral

thinking. The American auto industry, for instance, has suffered because of linear thinking where good ideas of the past were merely perpetuated. The belief that what has worked in the past automatically will work in the future has taken hold. Essentially, it is a case of "ready, fire, aim." So, whenever possible, encourage creative, lateral thinking.

Another hallmark of entrepreneurial collaborative thinking concerns the need to work better with limited and reduced resources. Reduced consumption of resources, a wiser and more respectful interaction with the environment, and achieving authentic sustainability increasingly demands collaboration and deeper connections with other units of society. More than anything, it involves a new management style that embraces a clear vision of what needs to be done, empowers the members of organization to do the job, encourages big thinking, and exercises considerable flexibility in all of these processes.

CL: Looking toward 2020, what new challenges to collaboration do you see on the horizon?

Jan: This is difficult to answer. In tough economic times selling the idea of collaboration is easier—because of necessity. Using technology for collaboration can have an upside and a downside. On the positive side, technology can be very effective in creating and maintaining networks. Today, we can use all the tools of the internet to bring people together in ways unheard of five or ten years ago. On the negative side, connecting with people electronically is less effective for developing a personal face-to-face relationship. And for collaboration, often it is that personal relationship which becomes the sustaining element.

On the larger, global stage, events tend to unfold at lightning speed. It is difficult to keep up with the main developments occurring today, let alone know what things will be like in 20 years. The challenge, however, would be to create and hold to a vision and

commitment to collaboration that is clear enough and strong enough to truly change the world for the good, or at least your small part of the world.

CL: Thank you for your time and insights and for inspiring us to collaborate more widely and effectively in the library world.

For copies of the past and current issues of *ICOSA: Connection and Collaboration*, and for other information about the magazine, visit: <http://www.icosamag.com>.