

Lemons? Lemonade? Or a Global Lemonade Franchise?

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Jane Fryar

Machiavelli wrote, “Change has no constituency.” From his century to ours, change challenges organizations and the people in them. Nonetheless, sometimes change embraces us. Such was the case for the town of Nevada, Missouri in 1991.

Mid-year, state officials called a meeting of Nevada’s civic leaders to announce the immediate closing of the town’s state mental hospital, the region’s largest employer. For three generations Nevada’s families had watched their children graduate from high school and begin work at the hospital the following week. Now, overnight, those jobs had evaporated. Nevada’s 9,000 residents reeled at the news.

“We had a choice,” says Mary Ireland, city council member, reflecting on those bleak days. “We could lie down and let our city die, or we could face the future and move forward.” Nevada moved forward. In the decade since then, Nevada has:

- Convinced the state of Missouri to cede the former hospital site, both building and grounds (530 acres) to the city.
- Formed partnerships with six colleges and universities to create the Nevada TeleCenter, a 7,000 square foot, state-of-the-art facility for use in interactive distance education and video conferencing.
- Begun construction of a residential subdivision (“televillage”) in which new houses, townhouses, and condominiums will come equipped with T-1 lines and other infrastructure amenities to facilitate home-based businesses. Both the “TeleCenter” and the “televillage” are located on the former hospital grounds.
- Retooled the local high school, community college and technical school so that course offerings better match the needs of local industry.
- Eliminated the financial woes once faced by the local medical center, thus assuring residents of quality care without the 90-minute drive to the nearest metropolitan hospital.
- Attracted an annual national baseball tournament that draws over 9,000 visitors; built motel and restaurant facilities to accommodate them; and invested a half-million dollars in refurbishing the city’s baseball diamonds.

These few examples help convey the enthusiasm and the almost miraculous accomplishments Nevada has achieved. What facilitated all this change? What kind of leadership energized it? Here are the leadership lessons I learned as I visited with Nevada’s key civic leaders.

Listen and Respect Followers’ Emotions

After the state’s announcement that the hospital would close, the city held a series of meetings in which citizens could vent their feelings. Leaders invited many state officials to these meetings to field questions. Local leaders also began a letter-writing campaign. At one point, state officials received more than 1,000 letters per day! While the effort did not change the fate of the mental hospital, it gave followers an outlet for their energies.

You Always Have Options

Nevada's leaders freely admitted times of frustration. Nevertheless, they stressed the need to look for solutions. "Don't tell me it can't be done," they said. "Tell me what the obstacles are and help me find ways around them." All of them stressed the importance of what they called "an abundance mentality." For example, right now, Nevada's 2% unemployment rate has put a lid on industry growth. Therefore, leaders have formed a committee to explore the possibility of bringing workers to Nevada—from Bosnia!

Vision Matters

Many in the community considered the town's leaders "crazed" when they started talking about Nevada's potential to ride the telecommunications wave into the future. "So what?" says Mary Ireland. "People need something to work toward, to look forward to. We encourage our people to stop thinking small. We want everyone to dream the impossible. We might accomplish it!"

Include Everyone in the Dream

Later, Nevada's leaders channeled followers' energies in another direction. Civic leaders share a motto: "No one is too young, too old, too busy, or too unskilled to make Nevada a better place to live." The city has organized 48 task forces to participate in Vision 2000. These task forces are exploring the question, "What do we want our town to be like in the new century?" One task force discovered that cigarette smoking poses the county's greatest health risk. So they applied for a grant, received it, and are setting up a smoking cessation clinic. Their goal? To make the county smoke-free.

Successes Begin to Link With Each Other

From small beginnings, the projects Nevada's citizens initiated, began to accomplish their objectives. Seemingly at random, these small accomplishments began to link together to form an overall change in the entire system itself. When failures did occur, leaders framed them in light of the town's successes. This helped breed optimism.

Nevada could teach Machiavelli a thing or two about change. Leaders can make a difference in the way groups look at the opportunities change brings. Change delivered a truckload of lemons to Nevada. The town not only made lemonade. Together, they developed a lemonade franchise!