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Building bridges through facilitation

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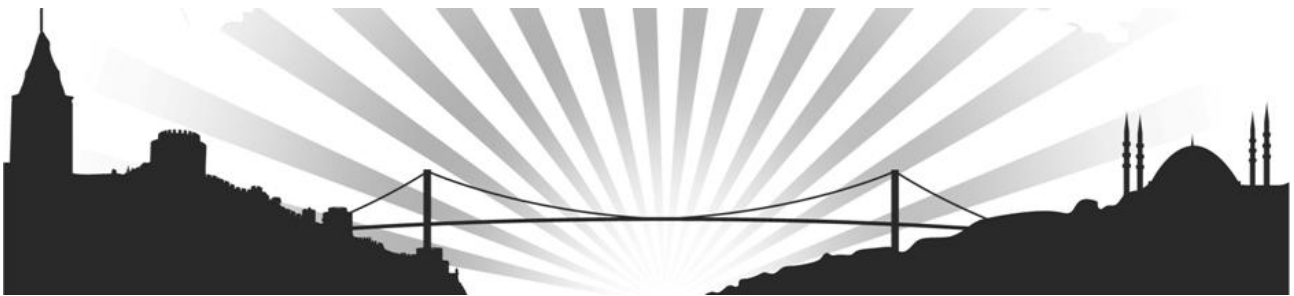
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Building bridges through facilitation

A special edition in collaboration with the International Association of Facilitators to mark their European conference, Istanbul, Turkey, from 14 to 16 October 2011



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Building a future together

Broadening ownership in corporate planning

Jonathan Dudding and Ann Lukens



How do you develop a new plan for organisational growth and success and, at the same time, design a process which provides the opportunity for full involvement of the organisation's members, staff, and partners?

This article describes how we worked with a housing organisation on their year-long journey as they sought to develop a new corporate plan, build up an internal team of facilitators, and strengthen the members' ownership of their future direction.



Keywords

corporate planning, participation, facilitation, capacity development, facilitation methodologies

Introduction

Involving all staff and client members in full corporate planning processes may seem to stretch the 'need for consultation' to its limits. However, in 2010-11, a community based housing organisation in Wales that is widely recognised for its community engagement strategy did exactly that. Bron Afon Community Housing (see box) wanted a corporate plan that was developed with maximum community, member and staff involvement; enhanced the organisation's capacity continually to design and facilitate participatory events; and broke down the barriers between departments to provide more cohesive and integrated services to tenants. This is the story of how we co-designed and facilitated that project.

Bron Afon Community Housing (www.bronafon.org.uk) is the registered social landlord set up in March 2008 as a community mutual association to own, manage and improve the homes previously owned by Torfaen County Borough Council in South Wales. This means that it is owned by the more than 1200 tenants and residents who joined as members and shareholders, and has 470 staff. It serves four areas, 17 communities and 97 neighbourhoods in Torfaen, many of which are among the most deprived in the borough.

Bron Afon activities fall into five main areas – construction, housing provision, support (particularly for the elderly), facilities management and community investment.

“Bron Afon has been created and shaped over the past three years by tenants and staff working together to design their own landlord and employer,” says CEO Duncan Forbes. “The result is a unique organisation with our own ways of working. Our membership committee is elected and scrutinises the work of our Board. Staff are involved in shaping and developing our policies and we are placing a great emphasis on people working across teams.”

Context

In keeping with its values, Bron Afon wanted all of its members and staff to be part of making the big decisions that would form its new five-year corporate plan. And as they wanted to keep those participants involved in delivering the plan over time, they also needed the process to develop the skills of their own teams in building capacity, working collaboratively and in partnership. Bron Afon believes strongly in participation and involvement and sees this as key to performing its role in the Torfaen communities. So it sought external expertise from ICA:UK (www.ica-uk.org.uk), an international facilitation, community development, and training organisation whose values are similarly participatory.

Bron Afon was looking for three principal consequences of this intervention:

- A new five-year corporate strategic plan – a short and accessible document to complement and supplement the existing business plan, and to identify what services will be delivered to whom, by whom, and how.
- A breaking down of departmental and ‘silo’ working, enabling and encouraging Board, staff and members to appreciate each other’s values and perspectives, and to share a common purpose and commitment.
- The development of internal facilitation skills and capacity to support ongoing, inclusive participation and partnership across staff and membership groups.

How we designed the process

Design was shared by the ICA:UK team (Ann Lukens, Jonathan Dudding and Martin Gilbraith) and the Project Management team set up by the client, reflecting a partnership approach based on our shared values around capacity building and community development. In addition to Bron Afon’s Aims and Values, we developed eight principles to underpin the process:

- As many members, staff, and board as possible should be involved at every stage, and each idea must have the same weight as every other.
- All outputs and documents should be available to all participants through various forums, including email and intranet, staff newsletter and notice board, and tenants and members newsletters.
- The outputs should show the links from Vision through to everyday working plans.

- Bron Afon staff should be involved in facilitating at all stages, both to build skills and to ensure that all participants saw the process as theirs and took ownership of the product.
- The Bron Afon senior management team needed to be part of the process throughout.
- Members' input was critical and had to be supported throughout.
- During training, all participants would actually be involved in a full demonstration of the processes that they would later facilitate. The output that they produced would be incorporated into the final reports of each event, ensuring that as staff members, they had input to the full process and were not excluded from the process by being facilitators.
- Venues must be fully accessible and all parties able to contribute fully.

These principles played an important part in designing training and events, consolidating information during the sessions, choosing venues and times, and maintaining the ongoing communication which was required across both teams throughout the twelve months (June 2010-May 2011). All the events were co-facilitated, with Jonathan and Ann as lead facilitators, modelling a co-facilitation approach and ensuring that the Bron Afon facilitators understood each step (with full training beforehand and detailed facilitation guides for each workshop).



Bron Afon members Peter Wadley and Dorothy Moreland discussing ideas at the Open Space event.

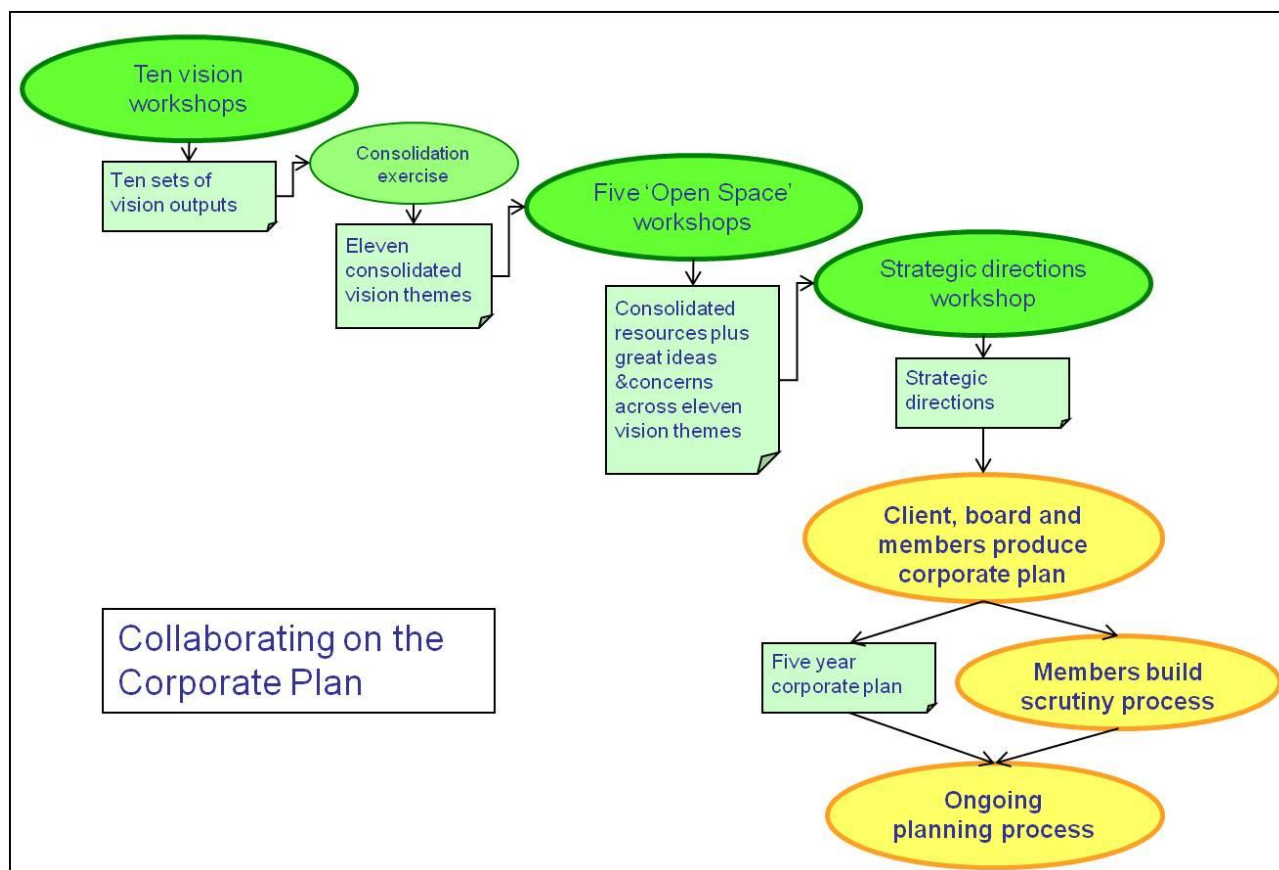
The jointly designed approach combined elements of facilitation, training, mentoring and coaching in facilitative leadership, project management, data handling, event design and community engagement. Training was also provided in Action Planning facilitation methods and tools for the detailed activities that would result from the directions set by the group, and a scrutiny process was developed to ensure that members could continue to be fully involved in how projects are selected and managed against the wider Corporate Plan. Combining three facilitation methodologies (the Technology of Participation, Open Space and Solutions Focus), the process included visioning, resource and opportunity identification, capturing areas of concern, and development of strategies for the Corporate Plan. These methodologies were chosen partly because of their own individual contributions to effective participatory planning, but also for the underlying principles they share and reflect (participation, teamwork, creativity, a leaning towards ownership and action, incorporation of learning and reflection) and their compatibility to Bron Afon's values.

Table 1: Major group-based events

Events	Purpose	Numbers involved
Ten vision workshops	Establish a vision of a thriving community as a starting point for the plan	600 members, and staff
Five Open Space workshops	Identify existing resources, challenges and generate great ideas for moving forward	600 members, staff, young people, local authority elected representatives and other partners
<i>(N.B. 3 of the Open Space workshops were initiated, designed and facilitated by Bron Afon staff alone.)</i>		
One strategic directions workshop (1)	Develop clear actions and strategies clarifying Bron Afon's priorities and contribution to the vision	80 members, staff and Board
One scrutiny process workshop	Establishment of a process to enable members to scrutinise the implementation of the corporate plan	15 Members of the Membership Committee

Each set of events was preceded by facilitator training, extensive publicity and follow-up to encourage people to attend, and careful identification and preparation of venues to maximise accessibility and ensure a memorable experience. Afterwards, all the outputs from each event were documented (the blue boxes in Figure 1) and collated - both as a record of what was agreed as well as to feed into the next stage and, finally, into the corporate plan itself. Table 1 (above) shows a summary of the major group-based events that took place during this project.

Figure 1: Collaborating on the Corporate Plan



Reflecting on the Experience

During the process six key lessons emerged:

The fundamental role of values

At the beginning of the process, time was taken to clarify and note the compatibility of the core values of both Bron Afon and ICA:UK. Our mutual commitment to participation, to teamwork, to inclusive decision-making and to capacity development underpinned the design of the whole process and provided an agreed basis for changes and alterations as the process continued. These shared values also informed the choice of methodologies used in the process, ensuring that the values were reinforced every step of the way.

The importance of documentation

By producing detailed documentation after each event, participants were able to track their individual ideas all the way through the process and to see them reflected in the final plan. The documentation also enabled the Membership Committee to carry out an initial scrutiny of the plan, based on the outputs generated during the earlier events. The detailed documentation also provided Bron Afon with a valuable source of ideas and resources which can be revisited and drawn upon in future. Lyn Weaver, chair of the Bron Afon members group, noted that this was a vital part of their experience:

“We have this overall picture that holds everyone’s ideas – not everyone says things in the same way, but with it all captured and grouped into themes, you could see that we were all aiming for the same thing. And it’s all still there – we can go back to it and find new ideas – it’s a resource we can use forever.”



A Bron Afon facilitator working with members to gather their ideas

The value of feeling forward movement

The events were designed to build on each other, to develop new ideas based on earlier outputs and to demonstrate progress towards the agreed goal of a new plan for Bron Afon. While this steady build-up led to some impatience from some members (who were eager to see decisions made and work carried out), the vast majority appreciated their involvement in such a process.

Such a feeling of forward movement needs to be maintained as Bron Afon moves into the implementation stage. The facilitation team needs to ensure that the ongoing planning, implementation and reflection process remains based on well-disseminated information, on the premise that all voices are heard and that the contributions of the whole team and the individuals within it will produce a better product and greater commitment. The commitment to the Vision that the group created together will be reinforced each time a new activity or project is initiated. It will be checked against initial data to be sure that the work signifies movement towards that Vision according to the directions and priorities that the group has agreed together. The energy and excitement will in this way be preserved and increased over time. Successes will be celebrated.



A Visioning workshop, with over 80 people working individually, together and at tables, supported by Bron Afon facilitators

Accountability and Transparency encourage participation and ongoing ownership

Care was taken continually to re-assure people (staff and members) that their input was valuable, that the ideas would be listened to, taken into account and, where possible, acted upon. Arguably such an assertion will not be proved until well into the implementation stage. However, with such a clear paper trail of event outputs to the plan, and the scrutiny process now in place, members and staff are encouraged not only to continue participating in the process but also to take ownership of the plan. There is excitement about the great and practical ideas they had generated that would help to achieve this vision for their communities. For their part, Bron Afon has taken care not only to document and to share all the ideas that did find their way into the plan, but also to record and hold all the ideas that did not - seeing them as a community-developed ideas bank for future projects.

Reflection is vital!

Throughout this process an important element of reflection was maintained to ensure the ongoing quality and effectiveness of the events, to support the learning of the facilitators, and to encourage staff and community members to play an active and ongoing role in implementation as well as planning. Time was built into each training event and facilitated session to enable such reflection to take place, with any recommendations being noted and implemented in subsequent events.

The value of interaction between Staff and Members

These events brought together staff members who seldom meet each other (e.g. trades and administrators), and brought the members in contact with staff members they never see. This interaction led to a new appreciation of the bigger picture and encouraged participation from beyond the 'usual suspects'. The use of trained Bron Afon facilitators added another dimension to this, raising their profile within the organisation and amongst members, and enabling managers to recognise a new skill set that is now established within the organisation.

And the results?

Bron Afon began the process as an organisation that valued participation and development of both staff and community. In the end, how were they different? What has changed? Although the process has only recently been completed, there are already three important signs of change:



Staff and members adding their ideas and prioritising the different aspects of the vision

Bron Afon has a strong, confident and creative facilitation team

“One of our aims in undertaking the project was to build capacity which we could use in the future and this has already been a proven positive outcome: the facilitation skills and techniques learnt and developed during the project have already been used in a number of other areas in the organisation. For example a workshop was held to identify and prioritise the support needs of our tenants to inform the future direction of this service using the trained facilitators and the process learnt which yielded really useful and comprehensive results.”

Penny Jeffreys, Learning and Development Manager, Bron Afon

The facilitators we trained have already undertaken many events for their teams and communities, have designed and facilitated the staff away day, and continue to see new and different areas where their honed skills, and new methods and tools, can support great results. Even when methods like Open Space challenged their inclination to organise (even influence) everyone, they stepped back and recognised that participants could just get on with it, allowing them the time and space they needed to come up with ideas, without seeking to influence what those ideas were.

In addition to confidence and skill, the facilitators have also learned creativity. At a meeting held minutes after the scrutiny session, one of the new facilitators took the new process and product and helped a different group to apply it. At the staff conference which the facilitation team designed and organised, they were praised for their creativity and resourcefulness both by staff members and senior management - the main challenge being how they would be able to do even better next year!

Bron Afon’s relationship with their members has been strengthened

The members were not only involved in this full process of corporate planning, but have also been exposed to these new skills and processes many times since this initial project. At a recent session, where a year’s worth of data needed to be pulled together, Shelley Hier (one of the Community support team facilitators) said,

“the process came at just the right time – we had a year’s worth of data and using what we had learned, we were able to make sense of it all with our members group – coming up with an outcome that was clear, concise and (in the end) easy. The members really felt they owned it and in fact they said ‘the best thing we’ve ever done at Bron Afon.’ They could see actions and ways forward – the result of us having better processes and understanding how to apply them in different situations.”

So already, the facilitators we trained have undertaken other and different events for their teams and communities, with great results.

Bron Afon has a Corporate Plan which meets everyone’s needs, and will continue to do so

With the process involving everyone in the organisation and many of its members, the Corporate Plan itself meets the needs of all parties – the board, members, staff, and the Chief Executive. It does so by providing a framework which is grounded in reality, reflects the aspirations of the communities Bron Afon is there to serve, and clarifies the organisation’s imperatives and priorities for the next three years.

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