

# The Beginnings of LENS International

as told by Lee Early, 2018

This is the story, from my perspective, of how LENS International, Inc., was formed and some of the circumstances surrounding the formation.

In 1980 Leah and I were assigned to the Detroit Area. At the time I was not pleased about the fact that ICA staff pricing for the LENS program was \$1,250, the same prices for non-profit as well as for-profit corporations like McDonald's. I wrestled with a variety of questions:

- *How could we use LENS methods to address "the economic tyrant" in our society?*
- *Priced at \$1,250 per event, LENS was our most expensive program. Is \$1,250 an appropriate price given its service value in the market place?*
- *Some in our staff saw the possibilities of LENS assisting our self-support obligations. Could the program monies earned from selling LENS be used for staff support by the Detroit House?*

The Detroit staff sent me, reluctantly, to Minneapolis for a LENS training program. During that program two things came to light. The first thing I realized was that LENS employed the key point that I had learned in a Dale Carnegie "World Series of Sales" training course years ago. That point was that all good sales persons were always out to discover the reason a possible buyer was NOT willing to buy whatever they were selling. A good sales person knew that if that block was overcome, he/she had the sale. In the sales course, coaches demonstrated additional techniques to get to the real and FINAL block to a sale. Getting to the REAL block was essential to any sale. In the LENS method "contradictions" were the key to effective future actions. This was indeed the second session of LENS -- the discovery of blocks and barriers that prevent the Vision from being realized. Lights went off in this salesman's head; that rang true for me.

The second "ah ha" moment happened when someone reminded me that . . .

*"Finally, the social responsibility of the Church needs  
to be described as that of the pioneer.*

*The Church is that part of the human community  
which responds first to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God.  
It is the **sensitive and responsive part in every society.**"*

. . . was indeed what we were all about, signaling the church as social pioneer; and H. R. Niebuhr raised his voice in my meditative council. So, wouldn't McDonald's have such a sensitive and responsive part in its society? Wouldn't any organization have "a sensitive and responsive part" within its organization?

Now that I had a clearer purpose, promoting the church in society and at the same time providing a self-sufficient staff, the only question was how.

Once back in Detroit, I wanted to approach General Motors (GM) immediately. But I knew that I could not waltz into the Detroit GM Headquarters and offer this corporate changing, 2 ½- day strategic planning course for \$1,250. They would laugh me out of the building. Besides we were calling this incredible process “a course” at this point in its evolution. GM executives might have laughed even louder at me, peddling “a course”.

The next challenge involved our staff members. They had an intense aversion to “selling” - selling anything. First, selling LENS at a market price was something we had never considered. We had no clue as to what price was appropriate. Selling anything nearing \$1,250 was simply impossible in the imagination of some. Chronic paralysis set into every arm, when faced with picking up the phone and setting an appointment.

Then, a breakthrough came. Katherine Barton had the courage to pick up the phone. She scheduled an appointment with Mount Carmel Mercy Hospital’s CEO. That conversation led to our first LENS. We held our breaths and charged them \$10,000 for the LENS. It was a hit. The hospital board chair was also the board chair for Orchestra Hall. After the LENS he called me into his office and asked me if we knew how to raise money. The renovation and restoration of Orchestra Hall needed \$2,000,000. “Yes, of course, we knew how to raise money.” Leah and Geoff Nixon filled that contract and earned \$10,000 per month, solving a long-time issue of self-support for our Detroit area staff members.

About this time Cynthia Vance became acquainted with a woman she met who was married to the president of Navitech, a young start up software development company. Cynthia secured an appointment with the president; and I flew to Chicago to be a part of the meeting, still not knowing what the market would bear relative to the price of LENS. I priced the LENS at \$25,000, and added that half was due upon completion of the LENS at the closing dinner celebration and the other half would be due within 30 days, based on his satisfaction. Of course, we were excited with the outcome, but I still wondered: *Is \$25,000 the market value of a LENS?*

That year the Detroit staff incorporated LENS International, Inc. The ICA owned 100% of the stock purchased for \$1.00.

During that same year we completed planning events for Sinai Hospital in Detroit, Jasper Mills in North Carolina and the Sisters of Mercy Headquarters in Chicago, each for \$25,000. I felt that we confirmed temporarily the market price. We also became more proficient as facilitators of LENS events. Now, to the third conundrum, how to get colleagues to sell it.

Step ONE: The Detroit office hired a marketing and sales consultant. One of the first things she taught us was the difference between marketing and selling. *“Marketing is anything and everything one does that does NOT require an immediate customer response. Therefore **everyone**, who is not selling, is marketing. Everyone is a marketer. In other words, selling is anything and everything one does that REQUIRES an immediate customer response.”*

Step TWO: She insisted that a LENS should have two prices. The first price was in our case \$25,000. In addition, the second price was six referral letters

based on a client's satisfaction. These letters were not "to whom it may concern" bulletins. They were to people the client knew personally and to people he or she felt could benefit from the LENS approach to strategic planning.

Step THREE: Repeat step ONE. Marketing is clean, nice, non-confrontational and safe. But selling was the one thing we could not get anyone interested in doing. Hearing the word "salesman" created negative images in our minds, like that of a car salesman: slick, manipulative, after my money, only interested in selling the car, certainly not interested in my needs. I seemed to be the only person who realized that we needed to master selling or we would never get to Step TWO.

A few months later a colleague and I came up with a helpful tool. I do not remember who was in the car with me that day, driving from Omaha back to Chicago. Over the 6 ½ hour drive, we created the Design Conference. The Design Conference was a method. Our staff understood methods. They could feel comfortable with the Design Conference. It was created to do ONE thing – sell a LENS.

It began with board work, diagraming "technology" for the client. Simply put, technology was any natural process to which we apply methods. Example: Water freezes at 32° Fahrenheit. To that natural process we may apply a set of engineering skills and the resulting technology is refrigeration. When we use a natural thinking processes such as vision, contradictions, proposals, tactics and implementation -- a natural thinking process to which we apply our methods, i.e.: context, individual work, group brainstorm and plenary – the result is the **Technology of Participation**.

We began charging \$1,000 for the four-hour Design Conference with the Executive Team of every organization. The LENS that followed the Design Conference *required* the participation of the President or CEO and his or her executive team plus about one-third of the participants representing a cross section of the organization all the way down to the floor. The success rate in scheduling a LENS after the Design Conference was over 90%. Why? We proved our process was serious and productive. The client tried it on and usually enjoyed themselves while they participated in the methods. We left the client with the critical Focus Question that the management team needed to answer with or without us. A Focus Question is any question, the answer to which deals with the CRITICAL issues facing the organization. We were off.

LENS International, Inc. rented a two-story house next door, bought desks, chairs, lamps, computers, printers to equip seven full time staff members. Our biggest year netted \$300,000 from LENS International, Inc. and \$120,000 from Orchestra Hall. The ICA then assigned individuals to LENS development in Chicago, Houston, Japan, India and Indonesia.

We formed a Detroit Board of Advice and Review – The BAR. The unofficial board was populated with clients, CEO's, Chairmen, Presidents and a sprinkle of Vice Presidents. A BAR member hosted a dinner meeting once a quarter at a location of their choice, since they were paying the tab. Wives and husbands were invited. The Detroit Athletic Club, the Renaissance Center and private executive dining rooms were the venues. We

reported present business, which included new programs we were thinking about, new clients, and our financial picture. Most of the review comments were cordial and helpful. Some comments were not so cordial but never-the-less helpful. One discussion was very pointed: "You guys either drop that particular client or we will all resign." There was no wiggle room on this one. We dropped considering AMWAY as a client. With the issued revealed in the AMWAY Design Conference, it was not a surprise that the BAR insisted we sever that relationship.

In the midst of all this growth and expansion, creating décor and attending various trade shows, we found that we needed some seed money. Our business model and financial projections indicated we needed \$25,000, perhaps as a loan. The BAR agreed and assigned one of its members, an attorney, to contact his banker to a very low interest loan for LENS International, Inc. The banker agreed and all we needed was the official board of directors to sign off.

We had no idea who the ICA had selected to be the official board of LENS International, Inc. We didn't know because they hadn't selected one. A team of staff drove from Chicago to discuss this opportunity with the Detroit LENS team. We presented our business plan and laid out the terms of the proposed loan. In short, the Chicago folks did not want to sign loan papers for fear of the liability. We reminded them that the extent of their liability was the total value of their stock, which was \$1.00. Finally, they suggested we sell 250 shares of stock for \$100 per share. "Why would you want to sell stock and dilute your equity?" we ask. "Because we don't want the liability of a loan," was their response. Okay, we will sell stock.

The Detroit staff knew the market value of the stock and subscribed to all 250 shares in under two weeks. Another meeting was held. This time the Chicago folks didn't want to sell the stock or sign for the loan. I asked: "Do you want a for-profit company here?" Apparently not. Unfortunately, as a result, we all retreated to our respective corners and operated on what we had with no additional resources.

In the late 1980s, I formed LE Associates as a sole proprietorship in San Diego, CA. My first client was McDonnell Douglas, the developers of the first indoor stealth range in San Diego. Again, the question of *what is an appropriate market price for LENS facilitation* came to my mind. I charged McDonald Douglas \$50,000 plus six referral letters. Two of those letters went to two very influential men: Dr. Joseph Eash at The Stanford Research Institute (SRI), and Dr. Joe Regan at the Lockheed Palo Alto Laboratory. I contracted with SRI and Lockheed, each for \$75,000 plus expenses. Dr. Regan wrote 26 reference letters. Joe Eash moved to the Advanced Systems and Concepts at the Pentagon in Washington, DC and called me years later to facilitate a think tank at the Pentagon. I also facilitated a LENS for the Incline Village High School English Department including six teachers and representatives of the school district, about eight people in all. (I had an inside track there since Leah was teaching in the English Department.) As an accommodation, they were only charged \$10,000. The Naval War College was the first time I had the courage to charge \$125,000 for a LENS.

## Learnings about Changing Imagination

Overtime we experimented with different approaches to break loose the imagination and therefore the creative actions of people in the companies and organizations we facilitated. The following are a few memorable stories.

**AMOCO Performance Products.** AMOCO had recently built a new plant to manufacture a water moldable plastic, metal substitute for the auto and aerospace industries. The plant was beautiful. There was just one problem. The product didn't work. The LENS spun off several Task Forces, one of which was charged with finding a solution to the manufacturing problem. The Task Force was made up of marketing, engineering, line workers and a couple of interested parties, about eight in all. In the first 30 days they were on to something. At the 60 day follow up they were building prototypes. On the 90 day review they had solved the problem. When I showed up for the 90-day review, I expected to see a wild celebration. Instead, the mood was somber. What the heck? I came to find out that months before the LENS, the executive team had commissioned a Blue Ribbon Task Force to study the problem and come up with a solution. \$5,000,000 later they had nothing. Then, an informal task force formed in the LENS, in their spare time, with no incentive other than do good work came up with the solution. They felt a bit embarrassed to have done what the committee had not. Several years later, I call AMOCO and ask how the plant was doing. Sales have doubled every year since that 90-day follow up. Key learning: Comprehensive participation in problem solving proved to be more effective than expensive "Blue Ribbon" committees.

**Army Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES).** The LENS produced eight task forces, one of which was to look at their transportation design. By the 90-day review, Task Force #4 had accounted savings in excess of \$4,000,000 in their transportation cost. No one, until then, had even considered the transportation design. Key learning: The Task Force shifted their self-story that this was someone else's problem to tackling the problem themselves.

**Lockheed – The Skunk Works.** When I first walked into Sherm Mullin's office, he sat me down, went to the book case and came back with a large scrap book. The title on the front cover was "From War to Peace, 1948". Sherm said "Lockheed was a little too early." LENS was to be the vehicle for this transformation, from mind set to plant lay out. At the 30-day follow up they decided to move their offices in Burbank to Palmdale in a week! The 60-day review was held in their new plant in Palmdale. At the 90-day review, Sherm called me aside and ask if I would facilitate one of the LENS Task Forces. The Task Force was charged to come up with "six silver bullets". A silver bullet was defined as leap frog technology. We had 90 days to come up with them using the following criteria: The product had to be commercially market driven with a military application. In other words, we will build a commercial product, put it in the hanger after the prototype was proven and THEN call the military. Here are a couple of examples:

- The first Single Stage to Orbit space ship developed as the replacement for the space shuttle. Competition was later opened and was fierce.
- 500 yards long, 17 stories high and, it flies! This machine will fly from inland manufacturing facilities, over truck and rail systems, over sea ports, over ocean

going cargo ships, over the port of call, over truck and rail systems on the other end and land without an airstrip in mid-continent India, or China or Russia, by-passing all existing transportation systems on both ends of the chain. Tonnage cost fell from .81¢ to .08¢. FedEx wanted 30 – yesterday.

Key learning: When the decision maker signs each Task Force Charter, the task force members have all the permission and authorization to tackle any and all barriers.

**Lenawee County Michigan.** This LENS was held in a college gym with 120 people, two TV crews and three newspapers. The Lenawee County Economic Development Committee hosted the LENS. The mission was to keep the county bond rating from falling further than it was. By the 90-day review, the bond rating not only fell no further but was raised a full letter grade. Key learning: We could facilitate large and small groups with outstanding results.

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While working with these clients and experiencing their changes and actions, the approach to LENS services was altered as well. Here are some learnings and changes that come to mind:

- In the beginning of LE Associates I hired colleagues to facilitate the workshops. Then with feedback from two company executives, I turned to training an in-house team of four workshop leaders and one production person to work with me and one associate. The unanticipated result was that the client had a trained team of facilitators, who could go anywhere and facilitate anything within the organization. They also became an unofficial review board, a lateral, unofficial management group as a cross section of all departments. The structural residue of trained workshop leaders had a double value since they provided me with a heads up as to what was really going on before each monthly follow up and were a trained group of “regular” folks who were a resource for future work.
- In 1987 we shifted from “event” courses to quarterly 30, 60 and 90-day follow up sessions with the entire LENS participant population. This built in accountability, gave an opportunity for task force course corrections, enabling greater effectiveness and customer satisfaction.
- The price of a LENS is flexible. The price depends on particular clients. The price for a Department of Defense contractor is different from the price for a hospital or a public school. During the Design Conference, after the issues analysis, I told the client the price is a little less than the value of the results of dealing with the critical issues. I would write down my price on a piece of paper and placed it face down in the center of the table. Then I asked the participants to write down what they thought the value of the process would be worth to the organization. My price was invariably lower than any single participant’s price.
- The Design Conference is a jewel. It seldom failed to produce a LENS. Whether it produced a LENS or not, it provided a valuable issues analysis to the client.

- The person who sells the LENS Design Conference is the person who leads the Design Conference is the person who facilitates the LENS. I marketed LENS in Japan, Korea, Micronesia, Taiwan, Philippines and Hong Kong. When a LENS team followed to “teach” the LENS, it did not produce the results for the effort and time spent. Key learning: A successful LENS occurs because of the personal, professional relationship created in the sales call and Design Conference when a buyer-seller relationship of trust is the result.

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In all these experiences we found we were working with the “sensitive and responsive” of companies and organizations - all doing remarkable and outstanding things, not all related to the bottom line and not all easily measurable in monetary terms, but certainly supportive of the organization’s mission and its employees’ well-being.

I am presently working with a colleague on one of the most challenging projects to date. The beat goes on.