

TOWN MEETING ACCELERATION IN THE UNITED STATES

This morning we are going to talk about Town Meeting, U.S.A. My job this year was to be a Town Meeting trouble shooter in the Town Meeting Post here where we received all the problems. I could write a book now on the 101 variations of the problems of lack of time, money and troops, and another book on 10 million great ideas. I have heard them all. Along with that I had so many great invitations this year. "Why don't you come out here and get engaged on the front lines?" "Why don't you come out here and help us circuit?" "Why don't you come out here and help us raise money?" They were tremendous invitations and it was hard not to respond to all of them.

Somehow in the midst of hearing the 101 variations and struggling with how to repond to the problems, the struggle was that nobody ever called us with their victories. The struggle was how to state the victory. I have to admit that it didn't dawn on me until preparing for a meeting at the White House. At that time the Town Meeting post was asked to create a picture of what we had accomplished with Town Meeting. So, one night I sat down and began to pull together what we had done and saw the amazing victory that had been created. Last year at this time we had done 435 Town Meetings, and it was a tremendous celebration of the two years work in Town Meeting. This year as we gather, we have 1,285 Town Meetings. We have tripled the number of Town Meetings we have done in one year. Six months ago on January 1, we reached number 599. So, we have doubled the number of Town Meetings in six months that we had done and this quarter, in the last three months, we have done over 400 Town Meetings. That's three times more than we have ever done in one quarter before. In the months of June there were three weekends in which we did over 70 Town Meetings, and the last weekend of June, there were 33 Town Meetings, and we didn't even pay much attention to them. Six months ago we would have been paralyzed having 33 Town Meetings on one weekend. Well, something like that began to clarify the kind of victory that we have won this past year.

What allowed us to win this victory? It was something like this. In the fall we had decided to use our troops, and use our strongholds and we created great maneuvers. Every Area went out on tremendous maneuvers using all the troops to go in and break open new areas. So you had 20 people converging on a piece of geography for two weeks, going in and breaking open all kinds of "Yeses". All kinds of excitement about Town Meeting, and then moving to the next piece of geography and breaking open all kinds of "Yeses" and all kinds of excitement about Town Meeting, and then to the next piece of geography, etc. But, nobody stayed behind to wrap up those Town Meetings, and therefore when it came to the first of January and all those troops went back out to collect the Town Meetings that had been said "Yes" to in the fall, there wasn't anything there. And so, in the winter quarter, we retreated back to our own turf. Back to doing Town Meetings one by one. Back to doing what we had done before, and

it didn't look like much of an explosion was going to happen in Town Meeting. And then, in March Oklahoma 100 came along. Oklahoma 100 was a fantastic happening. I think that there is not a person in the room that wasn't terribly offended by Oklahoma 100. "Why are we doing this?" "What are we doing?" "The model didn't work, did it?" But, I had to say to myself that Oklahoma 100 was, to put it crudely, the enema that Town Meeting needed.

Now, I'm going to say that differently: it was a happening. I'm not talking about doing 100 Town Meetings in a state. What we discovered was sociological winning. All of our winning before had been on paper. It had been planning winning; it had been theoretical winning. But, for the first time, we actually went out and did what we said that we were going to do on paper. We did it out there in the geography, and it was a tremendous victory for everyone that participated and finally, for the whole globe. I think that what really happened was it put us all on death ground - all of us. Our integrity was called into question and we decided to respond and do what we said we were going to do. That happening of Oklahoma, the decision to do what we said we were going to do and not let anything block us will become, I believe, for Town Meeting what 5th City has been for the Global Social Demonstration. A tremendous breakloose, therefore, was created. Everybody decided that this was the quarter to win. This was the quarter to do what we said we were going to do. Every Area was on death ground. And, therefore, we went back to our Areas and we decided to do three kinds of experimentation in this last quarter.

We did one experiment which I call the "Intensification of Traditional Town Meeting Set-up." Now, traditional Town Meeting set-up means that you organize a steering committee and you raise the necessary funding from the community; you train eight workshop leaders and you push for large numbers of people at your Town Meeting. That experiment went on basically in Area Chicago, in the states of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Missouri. The decision was to tackle these states holding onto those values and allowing images from Oklahoma 100 to give them a boost, in particular the four-week set-up model. Now, what happened in the midst of that was probably that experiment did less than one-half of what was anticipated in the Spring, and yet, a tremendous momentum was created. One example of that is the fact that thousands of dollars of corporation funding for the campaign came out of those states, which means that Town Meetings will continue. Another example is a statement former governor Romney made. He was the honorary chairman of Town Meeting: Michigan Week. In a press conference in the middle of the campaign, some nosey reporter asked him, "Now, what does your political future look like?" He said, "My political plans are to work with things like the Town Meeting program for the rest of my life." With a claim like that, Town Meetings will continue in the state of Michigan like never before.

The second experiment that went on, I call the "Intentionalization of Flexible Town Meeting Set Up". That was taking the Oklahoma 100 model and deciding to do it that way from the beginning. Deciding that the key was doing awakenment and that things like requiring functional eptitude of the communities, that is workshop leader training, coordinator training, etc., were not necessary. What was necessary was to do mass awakenment and use

the models that came out of Oklahoma 100 to allow that to happen. Now, this kind of intentionalization went on in New Jersey with the doing of 100 Town Meetings in that state, and it went on in Area Houston. Area Houston decided to move on three fronts. They did 25 Town Meetings in East Texas. They did 16 Town Meetings in North Carolina, and they did 18 in the Delta region in Mississippi. They did what they had decided to do. In Area San Francisco they decided to do 100 Town Meetings, that they would do 50 of those in California, and they would do 10 in each state where on one of the ICA offices was located, totally 100. So, 20 Town Meetings were held in the San Juakin Valley of California and an average of 10 in each of the other states were held. And, they did reach their 100. They did, in Area San Francisco, what they said they were going to do.

Now, there were a few problems in that, such as trying to keep track of the Town Meetings so we could give them a number and keep track of the totals. In the midst of this kind of explosion I had a conversation one morning on the phone with Bob Vance and I said, "Now, I think it's fine that you go out and do these Town Meetings and decide who your orchestrators are and go ahead and assign them, but it would be good if we knew what Town Meetings were being held, and for the global symbol, it would be good to know who was assigned to orchestrate them so we could put them up on our board. He agreed that that would be good and they would try to keep us informed here at Chicago. Then I said, "An example of that is yesterday Denver called up and wanted materials for the Town Meeting that was going to be tomorrow." And, he said, "What Town Meeting in Denver?" Anyway, they did their 100 Town Meetings and I think they all have numbers.

The third experiment that we did this quarter was in the saturation of several cities with Town Meetings in the neighborhoods. We did that in four different places, and in the midst of everything else we were doing, it didn't really stand out, but it was an amazing victory. The city of Schenectady, actually the whole county of Schenectady, had ten Town Meetings on April 30 and every community in that county had a Town Meeting. There was no one in the county whose neighborhood did not have a Town Meeting. That was an amazing happening. The same thing happened in Buffalo. The city of Buffalo held ten Town Meetings on June 4. And in San Francisco there were 12 different neighborhoods, 12 different communities in the city of San Francisco that had Town Meetings in one day. An amazing happening. One of them was in Chinese, one of them was in Spanish, one of them was in Haight-Ashbury. Now, this was really something. It was a tremendous symbol of a diverse community and what is really fun is to look at their song. They captured their community in that song like nothing else. It's to the tune, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands", and it goes "We have swinging singles and doubles too, We have gays and straights and lesbians, too." That's Haight-Ashbury, and they captured their community in that song. And then, the city of Omaha had seven Town Meetings this quarter. Somebody told me that you couldn't live in the city of Omaha and not know that Town Meeting was going on with the kind of publicity and TV commercials that went on.

Well, that was the victory of this quarter in those three different ways. And, I think you have to look back at our whole journey in Town Meeting over

the past three years to see what we have done and why we are exactly at the right point and that what has happened has been a necessary journey toward acceleration and toward mass awakenment.

Now, let's look at the Town Meeting U.S. Acceleration graph. Probably the first year or so of Town Meeting we were getting a foothold and deciding to establish this campaign. It was all about campaign building. It was all about training ourselves how to train ourselves, how to do steering committees, how to take a group of people and nurture them for eight weeks to bring off these fantastic events. It was necessary to do these Town Meetings one by one because each one had to be a real sign to ourselves and our colleagues for what we were out to do was train ourselves and the movement to do Town Meeting.

The way we did those was that each one of our ICA offices did some demonstration Town Meetings before 1976. I call this phase in the initial awakenment the phase of securing the fronts. Next we went out to secure advocacy, authorization, monetary support and what became critical was the size of the Town Meeting. That is, we wanted large events that could be seen by the people we wanted to impress. Then we began to get development entrees into corporations. When we did that we began to cluster our troops and join together in the areas to bring those off.

Then you have to look at 1977 as the beginning of the next phase: acceleration. What we were out to do was a mass number of Town Meetings in a short period of time and to cover the geography. Look at that map of the United States on the wall with the counties of the U.S. colored in with yellow where Town Meetings have been held. It is one third yellow. It is a symbol of the beginning of acceleration, the beginning of the covering of every county. What has happened there is that we began to awaken communities that had never been reached before. We began to create a new net of colleagues.

The next phase, then would be something like total coverage of the geography on national awakenment. What seems to be the trends during this acceleration phase? What has happened? What direction are we going? There is a trend toward doing rural Town Meetings and toward doing small neighborhood Town Meetings. People have reported over and over again that there are hundreds of thousands of communities of less than 1,000 that we overlooked in the first three years of doing Town Meeting. They are the ones that did Town Meetings this quarter. The funny thing about that is these are the communities and towns that are in a life and death situation. This is exactly the moment to have a Town Meeting where the economic support of the community is gone and the community needs to decide whether it is going to live or die. This happened in communities in the San Joaquin Valley in California, communities where the migrant populations began to settle and are creating communities. This happened in Utah in small Mormon villages with a new population of coal miners where the new population and the old Mormon populace have never met and never communicated before, but know that something needs to happen. This also happened in the small towns in the rural South where the Black population is just beginning to take hold and decide to be the leaders in the community. Those are examples of the life and death situation in the rural community.

Another trend is toward the use of the flexible format. We have done every conceivable time-design for Town Meeting that you could imagine. This quarter there were probably more Town Meetings being held in the afternoon and on Sunday than there were from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, and they have been fantastic. In the midst of them I know all the people wonder whether they are ever going to come off, but afterwards, everybody says that they were great happenings. I was in one Town Meeting (I think it was the first evening Town Meeting ever held) and they decided to go out and hit this town and do a Town Meeting. They were not going to do a Town Meeting on Saturday because everybody was too busy. So, they selected a week night and the schedule called for registration to begin at 6:00 and the closing to be at 11:00. That was amazing creativity. They decided that for an interlude they would serve milk to everybody. Then at the closing plenary celebration they would serve beer to everybody. Their story was that they were serving the two beverages that had made Wisconsin famous. Anyway, they thought there might be, at the most, 50 people at this Town Meeting. It was a city of about 900 people. The Town Meeting was held in the Fire Hall in a room about 30 feet square. Right next door were three fire trucks. We began to set up the Town Meeting when about 5:45 a fire alarm sounded and here came all the men and there went all the trucks. We thought there went our Town Meeting. At 6:00 some folks began to trickle in and by 6:30 there were about 30 people there and by 6:45 we actually got started with about 35 people there. We had only set up for 35, but we were beginning to wonder and so Fred went over to the corner of the room where we set up for 35 and proceeded to do the challenges workshop, and I took a small group to the kitchen where we were going to do the song, story, and symbol workshop. About half an hour later I came out to see how the challenges workshop was going and the room was full of people. There were 89 people there, The people turned out and the format worked.

There are all kinds of formats going on and most of what arrives in the Town Meeting Post we have ignored. But, we got one in the mail that I think was really fine and I'm going to read it. This is called the Power Model.

"Attention Town Meeting Post:

This Town Meeting set-up model was developed by the Billings House and first used in Power, Montana, May 26 and June 15, 1977. This is a model for quick set-up of Town Meetings in small communities requiring no more than three or four trips to that community. This comes out of our experience of having to spend numerous trips and hours previously, trying to convince the right people in the town to have a Town Meeting, then finding out that many people come to the planning meeting thinking they are attending the Town Meeting, and then do not attend the Town Meeting itself.

The model. We visit the mayor or other community leader in an unincorporated town. In Power it was the chairman of the school board. Use your normal pitch and authorizing materials, then tell them that we have discovered that the best way to introduce this to people is to have them experience it. So, what we would like to do is simply set up an evening demonstration or introduction workshop in order to let

the community see just how helpful this method might be. You set the date--a weeknight, time and place and in every town so far the person has simply called on the spot and reserved a location. Then you get out a list of 15 to 25 people, a cross section whom he will invite by phone. We promise to put up the posters in town. We either have them with us, fill in the town, name, date and place, or we come back later to put up posters in five or six locations. The form of the poster is important.

Then you treat the evening as the first half of the actual Town Meeting. (A) You arrive early and decor the room; set it up for a Town Meeting with tables, chairs, posters, charts, coffee, etc. (B) You have a host to welcome people and introduce you. You might even set up a regular registration table. (C) After a brief word about Town Meetings in your state, you do the New World talk with a downbeat on the description of the event and an explanation that they will actually be doing the first half of the Town Meeting. (D) You open the workshops with a song and do all the steps for a finished product. (E) After the closing conversation, remind the group that they have now completed one-half the process and lift up three choices before them: 1) Let it drop because they are not interested in going further, 2) Set the date for a full Town Meeting and make plans to get more people there, or 3) Decide that they have in fact done one-half the Town Meeting and set the date for the next evening to do the second half.

Suggest they meet earlier and have a celebrative meal and engage some entertainment. Invite more people the next time, recruit a typist, etc. Either send home names and challenge pages to volunteers for typing or take them back to the ICA office to type for use in the next workshop. Discussion of funding concludes the evening. Decide on a free-will offering or registration next time." That is the Power Model. It must work because Carl Ennis reported they did seven Town Meeting in the last four weeks of the quarter.

Well, other trends. One of them is called the "Flexible Funding Model." This has to do with the fact that we have not let funding block us in any way. We've been able to ask for a contribution that communities are capable of giving. Another trend is called "Attracting Establishment Attention." That's grounded in the several hundred phone calls we have received from various newspaper reports who think Town Meetings are fantastic but wonder what in the world is the ICA. We have attracted attention.

There is a trend towards doing the proposals after Town Meeting. People are doing concrete things. They are not even saying much about it and we need to find out more about that. One example of this for me is Ashtabula, Ohio, where I went for their second Town Meeting in May. I decided the night before, to ask what had happened after their first Town Meeting. "What about your proposals from last year?" I inquired. There was some mumbling. "Oh, we haven't done much." One guy added, "Well, we did get our Art Center." Someone else said, "We have repaired the bridges." Things are happening after Town Meeting and people are assuming they are supposed to happen. You don't have to call somebody to tell them you've implemented your proposals.

I want to turn to some reflections on what you have done, what you have really accomplished in communities having Town Meetings. I will talk about it in four different ways. With these 1258 Town Meetings we have created a consciousness of community -- an awareness of community in towns that has never happened before. Some of my colleagues would say we have done this not just in the 1,258 towns but in every community we have visited--6,000 communities. We have raised the question of community and demanded that they struggle with being a conscious community. Just having to get together to saying "no" to a Town Meeting has raised that consciousness.

I am reminded here of a little community in Buffalo that didn't really have a name. They were at the intersection of two streets. After the TM, they named their community and from now on it will be known as East Clinton. Never before did it have a name.

We have given communities a new courage and they have decided to engage in a new way. An example of this is a town in Utah that held a Town Meeting. For several years they had the materials for building a community center sitting in their town. A government grant had provided the materials. At the Town Meeting they decided that they would corporately build that community center. The hope and consensus for the direction of the community that had not been articulated just came to the surface in the midst of the Town Meeting.

This kind of courage is exemplified in Porum, Oklahoma. Porum decided six or seven days before March 26th to have a Town Meeting. They heard about it from neighboring communities. I don't think anybody ever visited them. They weren't even on the map. They called the ICA in Oklahoma City and said, "Please send somebody out here to tell us about Town Meeting. We have heard about it," and they had their Town Meeting.

Porum's basic problem was that a lot of juvenile delinquents had been coming into their town and doing a lot of property damage, including stealing personal property. The whole place had been taken over by kids. The mayor reported sometime afterward that the community had decided to stand up and not allow that to happen on the other side of their Town Meeting. He said, "You know, that Town Meeting was worth over a million dollars."

Another example of this courage and exciting engagement occurred in Schenectady. One of the Schenectady Town Meetings was in the downtown section of town which was very run down. People involved in the Town Meeting decided to go to the City Council and demand that it had a plan for redeveloping the downtown. There had been talk of it for years and years. This was on everybody's schedule as something that needed to happen. The Town Meeting people appeared at City Council with a long piece of butcher paper in order to create a timeline with the City Council for how that town was going to be dealt with. One of the gals from the Town Meeting led a workshop with the City Council -- and they created a timeline for redeveloping downtown.

We have also demanded unbelievable creativity -- creativity that communities thought they could never come up with. Examples of that are Town Meetings in schools where teachers said you would never get kids to sit that long, you would never get them to pay that much attention and you would never get them

to take this seriously and respond. Every Town Meeting we have done in a high school has proved that to be wrong. These kids have become engaged. They have participated more in that one day event that they had in their entire high school life.

Some of the Town Meetings that we have done with elders have been an amazing decision on their part to participate. One was held in Wisconsin. A gal who was there in a wheelchair had never been out of that wheelchair. She didn't get out of the wheelchair except to go to bed. It wasn't that she incapable of getting out of the chair. She never did. As she was getting ready to read a proposal at the plenary, one of her staff was trying to keep her in her chair, but she decided to get up. She made her way to the front and read the proposal.

One young lady talked about it in this way: "My mother went to a Town Meeting last year. I laughed at her before she left to lead a workshop and I laughed at her when she came home. This year, I was laughing at her as she went out the door to the second Town Meeting and she dragged me with her. I came to the Town Meeting." During the plenary this gal said she hadn't wanted to come and was looking forward to getting out of there. But during that day she had learned to love the community in which she lived and was going to suggest a Town Meeting in her high school. Furthermore, when she heard about the possibility of working on Town Meetings for high schools, she decided she was going to come to the Global Research Assembly. She went to the City Council to suggest it and they paid her way!

We've seen this creativity more than anywhere else in the Town Meeting Assemblies. We've done eleven of them in which delegates from the various communities are invited to use various procedures for looking at the proposals and determining how to implement them at the local level. What has happened is awakened care. When you get people out of their own local community into a gathering with people thinking globally, instant collegiality happens -- collegiality with each other. They are all going through the same thing. There is a new collegiality with their own community and with the methods.

But people also know at these meetings that it is going to be very difficult. It is going to be very solitary. So there is the cry for keeping up with this network of people who have gathered, who are trying to do the same thing on the local level. It is showing up in things like the decision that there could be a newsletter in East Texas to keep people informed on what is going on in their communities. In the Delta, the people decided to get back together in three months to talk about what they have done in their various communities.

We have created unbelievable numbers of new colleagues. Two young black men attended the Town Meeting in their Buffalo community and the next weekend were asked if they could help lead a workshop in their assembly. They came to the training sessions, and led workshops at the assembly. The next weekend, their two names showed up on the orchestrator assignment sheet for New Jersey. Instant collegiality is going on.

I believe the victory has been doing this mass number of Town Meetings, allowing awakening to happen and giving back new life to communities like they have never known before. Several things need to be in our brooding for the future as we look at what needs to happen. How do we face the kind of new life that has emerged in these communities and begin to create the movement, the network that is there, for new colleagues? How do we allow what has happened in the United States to become part of a global acceleration campaign? What are the necessary tools for the paradigm shift that Town Meeting has gone through in the last several months? How do we support the Town Meeting campaign in small towns? Those are the underlying issues we need to deal with for the sake of the future.

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TOWN MEETING USA

Chart showing the acceleration over the first twelve quarters



