

ARL™ NEWS

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Large Group Interventions

Rebuilding the city and dealing with feelings, one year after 9/11

It was almost a year ago that the United States suffered the vicious terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. The rebuilding of the Pentagon is nearing completion, and the effort to clean up “Ground Zero” was finished with great speed and under the cost estimate. The next phase – how to address the damage inflicted on the fabric of New York – has required more time and longer deliberation.

As part of the ongoing effort to rebuild Downtown New York, a large-scale public conversation, entitled “Listening to the City” was held in New York City on July 20 and 22, 2002. The aim of the meeting was to present architectural plans for the revitalization of a huge area of Lower Manhattan, and, through a large-scale democratic process, gather suggestions from a wide cross-section of stakeholders interested in turning destruction into respectful memory to the dead, and into hope for a revitalized downtown. **Tony Pearson**, a **LIM** partner was one of the consultants who helped facilitate the two meetings. **ARL News** interviewed him about the experience.



ARLN: *Who were the convenors of this meeting?*

TP: The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, a broad based coalition of nearly 100 civic, business, environmental, university and labor groups, committed to devising strategies for transforming Lower Manhattan. *AmericaSpeaks*, a nationally recognized non-profit organization, led by Carolyn Lukensmeyer, its founder, and a former policy advisor in the Clinton administration, was responsible for the overall facilitation. And the extraordinary logistical demands required by the conference.

ARLN: *Why were the logistical demands so extraordinary?*

TP: Well, consider managing a system consisting of 5000 participants, seated at 500 tables, each with a facilitator. Consider handling a volunteer army of several hundreds. Consider designing and executing communication demands; coordinating emails, phone calls to facilitators and participants alike; six 20-foot screens to carry the image of presenters and lead facilitator as she led the group through the complex process of making their voices heard. Technical staff (summon able by waving green cards) helped facilitators capture each table’s

views--Apple donated computers for the occasion—and hand-held voting machines for each participant. Security staff (red cards) to maintain calm amid during high emotional incidents. Grief counselors ready to help survivors and families and friends of victims. Signers at each corner of the main stage, positioned in the center of the huge space--to speak to hearing-impaired. Food service for over 6000, including 240 press representatives from around the globe. And those are the basics.

ARLN: *How were participants selected? At random, or by invitation?*

TP: The convenors attempted to assemble a cross-section that mirrored the city's diversity. In addition to the obvious qualifications of geography and demographics, they wanted to include a representative sample of relatives and friends of victims, workers from downtown, people who live in the area, fire fighters, police, emergency personnel and other helping professionals.

ARLN: *Where did the facilitators come from?*

TP: From every state in the USA—as well as Australia, England, Afghanistan, Colombia, Britain, and South Africa. An astonishing throng, many of whom had never been in New York before. The convenors attempted to ensure that the consultants had substantial experience with potentially wrenching team interactions, and took pains to equip us with insights and methods to ease the process.

ARLN: *How much orientation did you get? And what were its key points?*

TP: They had to fit 500 consultants, serving as facilitators, into three sessions. They didn't give us too many instructions, but among the points they made were:

- depersonalize the tension by saying 'this topic is a tough one' rather than say 'this may be wrenching for some of
- you'
- get a volunteer to take notes for table's thoughts, but try for someone who has had experience as facilitator or
- note-taker—not someone who loves 'working with computers'
- sit next to the person capturing the table's opinions (Good advice. Some note-takers tended to record their own
- thoughts to the exclusion of the table's.)
- don't hesitate to call for help from security personnel. There might be some raw emotions shown. (There were,
- and some people had to be 'disinvited')

ARLN: *Could you describe the process?*

TP: Briefly, the flow was:

- Tables discuss a series of themed questions
- The scribe collects the opinions and sends them by computer to the Theme Team, a group of 20 consultants who
- synthesize the comments of all 500 tables
- After 45 minutes the Team presents synthesized statements back to the audience
- Participants vote, using hand-held computers, and rank these statements according to their perceived worth,
- applicability, impact on environment, on business etc.

- Voting results become part of the record which is to be presented to the conveners

Each table consolidated its views on several topics.

- Why is it important for you to be here today?
- What are your hopes and concerns as we go about rebuilding and remembering?
- What are your views about the six proposals you have just seen for the redesign of Lower Manhattan? (There were six specific designs for the rebuilt site of the World Trade Towers that had been drawn up by an architectural firm.)
- What additional advice would you give the planners?
- Does the Mission Statement capture your feelings about what the memorial should be?
- For rebuilding lives after 9/11, what do you feel about the key issues of: 1) Jobs/Economy; 2) Housing/ Civic amenities/ Culture; 3) Transportation

At the end of the day, *AmericaSpeaks* distributed hard copies of a summary of the day's discussions!

ARLN: What were your main learnings and impressions?

TP: On a personal level, the urge to help was a mixture of helping to heal the city I love, of assisting in a large and meaningful democratic process, of supporting those whose lives had been altered by the attack, and of repudiating the hatred that served to fuel the attack. Just at my table, I learned about the measure of human compassion from a priest who served at the morgue, and about determination from an immensely--and beautifully pregnant table member, three days before her delivery—who lives four blocks from Ground Zero. And I became aware how isolated I had felt as New Yorker (after 38 years I qualify as one!) after the attack, and was comforted and moved by the sight and words of so many who came to help facilitate this event.

From the professional perspective, I learned about the complexity of large group interventions; became familiar with the technology involved for swift capture of opinions; learned by watching how peers handled situations, and was struck — for the 100th time — by that fact that interventions take so many forms. It was a salutary revelation, too, to see that meticulous planning has no substitute. There were mercifully only a few occasions when the Security staff was needed. One involved a consultant from Dallas near me who was confronted by a situation where one person at her table berated two family members of a victim for not 'getting over their pain, and getting on with life'. The disruptive participant was walked firmly out of the building, and the family members were offered the help of grief counseling.

ARLN: Do you think the event worked in achieving its purpose?

TP: There has been one real sign that the process worked. There was almost universal consensus that the designs presented did not combine the desired mix of respectful memorial, open space, additional housing, arts center, and commercial buildings. In mid-August, the Civic Alliance announced that the six designs had been scrapped and that an invitation had been sent out to other architectural firms, including those from countries outside the USA for new designs. That's powerful. 🙏

If you want to read more about this, visit www.listeningtothecity.org

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