

TWELVE EASY LESSONS

For the benefit of those of you who want to create an intentional community, following is a summary of the key lessons we learned – lessons that may assist you, and at the very least are things to think about.

We learned early on that we weren't alone in wanting to create what is commonly called an "intentional community". Everywhere are interested people: married couples like ourselves, people who have lost their partners, single parents, extended families, people with trusted colleagues, people with shared hobbies or ideals, sociable people, young people, older people. This book aims to inspire you to follow in our footsteps – to find people you trust and wish to be with, and to take the amazing journey of setting up a community for yourself, so you enjoy life more fully, not less, as you get older.

LESSON #1. CREATE YOUR VISION.

There is perhaps no more important skill to apply in building any team than the ability to create vision. In our first New Year's Day session, when we worked with glue and glitter to craft our visions for ourselves, we were getting valuable practice at designing our own futures. We were learning how to envision something in such a way that it got under our skin, reaching a core desire which could give it energy to burst into flame.

Over and over through our journey, we worked at painting a picture which could overcome the obstacles that reared up before us.

Creating vision altered the course of our future many times.

I also learned that a vision doesn't last – you have to keep polishing it.

It seems to be human nature to think that once we've created a picture in our minds, the vision is there to stay. My experience reluctantly attests to the contrary. It's hard enough to keep your own vision on course, but a group's vision? – now, THAT takes work. I was always flabbergasted by how quickly little cracks in our alignment would appear, signalled when I found myself thinking, "Hmmm, that's not what he said before," or "That's not what I thought she wanted."

Keep listening for whether or not you are all still aligned. Ask questions. Share your own pictures and your concerns. Your project is hard work; it's risky; it pushes your buttons. These are the things that blacken the finish on your silver samovar. Get out the cloth and keep polishing.

You have to recreate your vision, re-commit to it, and choose it again. And again. And again.

LESSON #2. BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES FOR MANY, MANY MEETINGS.

If we'd known at the beginning how many meetings would be happening over how many years, we might never have set off on this journey. But thankfully at the start we were innocent of that knowledge.

You will need to apply everything you know about conducting good meetings.

For example:

- Have a clear agenda and agreed-upon intentions for every meeting. When you sit to meet, the first thing to do is to clarify everyone's intentions for this meeting. In this way, when unrelated issues boil up (as they always will) someone can suggest that these be deferred to another time, so that today's agenda can be fulfilled. This practice helps mitigate the frustrations and disappointments that would otherwise occur, and keeps the meetings from ending at midnight.

Which leads me to:

- Agree upon a time limit for each meeting – as short a time as conceivable to get the result. One person in our group hated meetings, and the only thing that had him persevere was that we kept them short and finished on time.
- Take thorough minutes, circulate them, and follow each other up on promises that were made. Without undue righteousness, of course.

It was also important to articulate and document what we'd learned from field trips we made while we were trying to find our ultimate location. We took notes about each place we looked at, and summarised what we'd learned – about what we wanted and didn't want – from each outing. We also recorded questions that were raised by each property: “Do we really want to care for more than a hundred acres?” “Is it sensible to live more than a half hour from a hospital?” “What is there to do for entertainment here?”

LESSON #3. RELAX. IT DOESN'T NEED TO BE PERFECT.

Over time, we got to know what our deal-breakers were. I came to understand what I **MUST** have, as well as what I couldn't tolerate – in the relationships with my partners, in the location of our community, in the style and design of our new home.

Everything else I became prepared to compromise on. Once I understood it was okay for things not to fit my pictures exactly, I could just relax. I discovered that things could be perfect without being MY idea of perfect. It was okay if we were not in the general locale I'd originally pictured. It was okay if there was a bit of swamp at the bottom of our property. It was okay if a partner got angry every now and then.

In forming an intentional community you'll have to do a lot of give and take. You might as well start practising early.

LESSON #4. WORK OUT YOUR COMMUNAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.

I personally believe you can't move ahead without consensus. If anyone feels overridden on almost any issue, you can bank on it coming back to bite the group. That means the veto is a powerful tool which must be used when someone feels strongly about something. The decision-making process can seem painfully slow while you talk through an issue until everyone is singing from the same song sheet. But sing you will, eventually.

We used another principle: “creative alignment”. This means you may not fully agree with something, but it's not mission-critical for you. You can in good conscience say, all right, I can go along with that – and then you do. From that moment on, you give away the right to say “I told you so” or to hold any grudges. It becomes in effect **YOUR** decision.

LESSON #5. REMEMBER YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

We've been able to provide much support and inspiration for one another. There was a time when Rick and I were struggling with our business and used the group to kick-start a new life for it, then successfully sell it...when Eve developed osteoarthritis and had to have replacement surgery on both hips...when Judy was downsized in the GFC and fought her way through what's come to be known as her Year of the Thousand Job Applications...when Michael faced nine months of dwindling sales in his consultancy business...when Daniel reached a stalemate negotiating the sale of his business to his long-term partner...

That's the point of the whole exercise, right?! You have chosen to have others closely around you for pleasure and support. You don't have to figure it all out yourself, or cope with the challenges all on your own.

Play on each other's strengths. For example, part of the power of a group is that there is usually someone who still has enough spirit left to say, “Let's try it again; let's keep going.” Nurture this person.

Nurture the person who can massage out differences of opinion. Nurture the person who isn't afraid of strong emotion. Nurture the person who keeps a sense of humour in a tight spot.

Nurture *everybody's* strong suits because you're bound to need every one of those strengths somewhere on the journey.

LESSON #6. PREPARE FOR PUBLIC OPINION.

We found out early in the piece that everyone around us was interested in what we were doing – and everybody had an opinion. For every person who said, “What a fabulous idea,” there was one who was ready to cry, “Folly! Folly!”

The skill we had to develop was being willing to hear the ideas and the concerns and learn from them, while filtering out feedback that wasn't relevant to our situation. We developed thicker hides in the process.

LESSON #7. YOU'VE GOT TO TALK ABOUT THE MONEY.

First of all, you must be clear about your own financial situation. You need to understand your current assets and liabilities, as well as your projected income and expenses over the years to come. If you set up a time to talk about the money with your friends, it's one sure way to make sure you get your own financials ready.

It's just as important to be clear about each other's financial situations. You need to know, blinkers off, how solid, solvent and savvy each participant is. It's okay to ask questions and probe.

As Daniel often reminded us, anecdotally it's the MONEY that has communities come undone more than any other single factor.

LESSON #8. PLAN YOUR EXIT.

We began talking about our exit agreement early on. It was a hard conversation to have, especially when we were in the throes of trying to get a highly challenging rocket off the ground. Who wants to talk about something falling apart when you're working so hard to get it together?

But you will learn a great deal about what's important to you, and to the others, when you have these conversations. You'll learn how realistic your partners are, how important money is (or not), what future plans are, how the kids fit in, what people see as the thing that could drive them out of the arrangement. These are good things to know.

Consult with a lawyer. Lawyers earn their livings by looking for potential problems, loopholes, disasters. Crafting exit agreements is one place where that's a very handy skill.

LESSON #9. COMMUNICATE.

Communicate. Negotiate. Communicate. Compromise. Communicate. Align. Communicate. Capitulate. Communicate. Repeat as required.

You have to be prepared to say what you're thinking, and to listen to what you don't want to hear. Endless communication is required to work through tough issues. Sometimes you'll have to stop and figure out what is mission-critical – for yourself and for the project as a whole, and be prepared to compromise. You'll confront personal deal-breakers. We have all been pushed far outside our comfort zones. As Eve says, when we're sorting out some major disagreement, “Let's just remember this is keeping us young.”

Your project requires alignment, and alignment requires a real commitment to communication.

...And sometimes even that is not enough.

When our project was deeply threatened, we brought in a skilled outsider to help us communicate through the tough issues. Perhaps we could have got through this period on our own, but I'm not sure.

(As an aside, someone with communication expertise can help *dismantle* a group if its project turns out to have been a bad idea. As with a divorce, you're much better off if you maintain a calm working relationship with your ex. An outsider is often best-positioned to facilitate that.)

Why is it sometimes so embarrassing to acknowledge that we might need help talking and listening? – It shouldn't be, as these are life's two most challenging skills.

LESSON #10. USE THE SKILLS OF NEUTRAL EXPERTS TO HELP WITH GROUP DECISION-MAKING.

We used external experts to suggest final decisions regarding such things as house structure, interior design, exterior finishes and kitchen design.

While that might seem an obvious thing to do, what is not so obvious is how it helped six opinionated people get aligned on key decisions that had to be made. Once we'd chosen our consultant, it became almost a point of honour to let them guide us.

It allowed our critical decisions to be made without shouting, stress or loss of face. And it must have worked from a design perspective because we got a result we're very happy with.

LESSON #11. SAVOUR THE VICTORIES.

Savouring your victories doesn't just apply to the big milestones, like when the project has been successfully completed (though we certainly celebrated that). A practice we took on was stopping to appreciate each success along the way. We learned to congratulate ourselves and each other – to drop an email or make a quick phone call for no other purpose than to say, hey, well done. This ritual helped give our project traction at the times it was most needed.

LESSON #12. KNOW EACH OTHER VERY, VERY WELL.

The best decision we ever made was the one to trial living together. We learned SO much from that process. We learned we could indeed live communally with others; we learned our own and each other's strengths and weaknesses. We looked for personality deal-breakers and didn't find any. Equally, we could have found some – and it would have been much easier to break up the project when we were renting together than when, for example, we were half way through building a house.

Don't close your back door until you know you all want to be in the house together.

The process of living together also gave us realistic expectations about one another. Understanding what I could and couldn't expect from everyone else gave me greater patience with them as the project heated up – and no doubt gave them more patience with me.

We are sometimes asked: Would it have worked as successfully if you hadn't known each other as well as you did before you started?

In my view, yes, you must know each other very well, but more important is learning how to accept each other. That can be done in less than seven years – but I'm not sorry we took as long as we did.

Following that logic, you need to start early – years and years ahead of when you plan to make your move. If you haven't begun yet, tomorrow morning would be a good time.

As the old Chinese proverb says, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is now."