

Transformative Effects

And Then There Is Hope

by Carmen R. Tolivar

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.*

—Emily Dickinson

There are several words that participants in a Critical Friends Group (CFG) new-coaches training week frequently use in describing the experience. They'll say it was profound, inspiring, deep, collaborative, exciting, rewarding, insightful, and safe. They will also speak of personal and professional transformations, and they will speak of hope. The language choices are uncanny in their consistency through the years. As one who has trained many new coaches, I have been wondering what it is about CFG new-coaches training that brings about such consistency in the descriptions of the diverse individuals who sign up for the week-long professional development opportunity.

I remembered that when I was a trainee myself, my colleagues and I were unanimously sorry when our week of training was over. What is it about those five days that provokes such consistent attachment and descriptions? Certainly before the training experience we are all familiar with protocols, whether they result in a useful set of norms for group behavior or in collectively enlarging a group's understanding of text. I suspected I was looking for something subtle and elusive.

I looked at all the pieces of the mosaic we call CFG new-coaches training, and the first answer to come was easy enough to accept: this was good old synergy at work. The result of the combined efforts was, of course, much larger than the sum of the parts. But another part of my mind went right on searching until one day the pieces fell into a different

pattern. A new connection sprang up as I suddenly remembered the ancient Chinese text called the *I Ching*, also known as *The Book of Changes*. The book contains sixty-four short oracular pieces called hexagrams. One of them is known as “Harmonizing People.” It speaks of bringing people together, harmonizing, sharing a goal, cooperating, and emerging with a common purpose. It tells us that the gathering of beings cannot be obstructed forever.

* * *

And so it is with new-coaches training. On many a Monday morning, as a training week began, I have witnessed the assembling of people: educators of different cultures, schools, and school districts doing their best to welcome one another, not quite sure how many critics and how many friends they will find in a cold hotel training room at eight o'clock in the morning. In other words, they are *present*, but they haven't really *gathered* yet.

By mid-afternoon of the first day a group identity begins to form, a common language emerges, from the still-uncomfortable efforts of trying out new protocols and a first experiential activity. Places of agreement and understanding begin to grow tendrils, seeking out support. Almost imperceptibly, the need for an open expression of the common intent that led these diverse people to our room breaks through and starts to form. Ever so tentatively a bit of trust stirs the air. Sometime during the second day, in quite an intangible way, participants know at least one thing: together, they have stepped into a place they have never been before: “This experience forced me to go places as a teacher where I would not go ordinarily,” in the words of another participant, “and I saw it coming early on.”

The doubts and skepticism characteristic of an anticipated new experience bounce against the power of the day's agenda.

“Is this stuff feasible?”

“Where do I start?”

“What if others don't join?”

But during a new-coaches training week, others do join. Together participants recreate the world of the *I Ching*'s “Harmonizing People” hexagram, a gathering where people harmonize, cooperate, share a goal, and emerge with a common purpose. The gathering of those beings is no longer obstructed.

What exactly are we, the instructors of the coaches-to-be, doing other than following an agenda we know well, one that flexes to accommodate the needs of the coaches-in-training? Once again, the mosaic pieces rearrange themselves and the new design shows that, as instructors, we

become the instruments of this powerful process. On a good day, it comes through us unimpeded, with a life of its own. I marvel at the recognition that, so many times, all we do is move out of the way and let it play out. My need to understand is soothed for the moment, but that doesn't last.

I sense there's more to the picture than what has been revealed so far. I take another look at our mosaic pieces—only this time I stand on my head, and naturally, my perspective changes. The new configuration emerging reveals that in a week's time, a strong professional and personal transformation has been given voice in the new coaches' final comments:

"I have grown as a person, a human being, and a professional in just five days."

"This was a professionally and personally renewing experience for me."

"I feel that I have grown as a professional teacher and, more important, as a person!"

"I am a completely better teacher and human being because of the CFG experience."

That must be the final pattern, I say to myself, lowering my feet to the floor, at last quite content with the results.

Only it would be wrong to stop there, because none of that apparent growth has been tested in the daily arena of the new coaches' workplaces. Then and only then is the ultimate gift of CFG coaches training truly achieved. Beyond protocols, experientials, articles, and group norms: beyond all the components of that intense week, a coach who goes back to any site and implements a CFG is infused with a sustainable kind of hope. Emily Dickinson's "thing with feathers" perches in our souls and we sing along; from that point on we aren't likely to stop at all. Again, in the words of some new coaches:

"I came in not really knowing what to expect and leave with a new perspective, fond memories, and more hopeful than I have been in years."

"It was uplifting to see hope in all the questions and doubts I've had about the future of education!"

One last time I remember my own experience with new-coaches training. My colleagues and I had also experienced the unique transformational power, felt the excitement, and glimpsed the hope. But like

the new coaches now learning from me, we were not yet tested in the arena of our professional challenges. That came months later during one of my first experiences as a CFG coach. The results are best captured in this comment at the end of one of our meetings: "I just had to let all of you know how inspired I was by our meeting this week. It was as if I had been invited to sit in on a legendary 'Council of the Elders.' Every person who spoke or asked a question or turned an idea over took the conversation to a new and deeper level. Each person came at the problem from a slightly different perspective and the comments involved such detailed experiences that the conversation was like a rich tapestry we were weaving out of our shared knowledge and understanding. Thank you all for helping me see what we're all working toward and be a part of it."

This time my brain and I know we finally understand the elusive forces that make the CFG what it is, that make it so powerful. Hope is singing in the soul; our work is done. We are going out to play now.

Carmen Tolivar is on the faculty of the School Management Program (SMP) at UCLA. She has been an NSRF facilitator since 2000 and a CFG coach since 2003.

