

How You Do, Not What You Do: Glenn Sigurdson's Career, as described by Jerry Cormick

Glenn and I, usually with our colleague Barry Stuart, have spent countless hours struggling for the term that best defines what we do. Mediator? Facilitator? Coach? Meddler? None conveys a sense of all that takes place when, to use Glenn's characterization, he "works in the middle of complicated problems".

Glenn and I have worked together for more than three decades. We soon discovered that we although we had travelled different roads we had come to a common set of values and principles to guide our practice. My own experience closely mirrors Glenn's. We have worked together on many projects and initiatives – including the one he describes here – all intended build agreements and relationships between individuals, organizations and governments. *Vikings on a Prairie Ocean* describes Glenn's road.

In high school we wrote an essay describing the human hand to a being that had never seen a hand. As Glenn describes the road he travelled from Riverton to Vancouver and from fishing to orchestrating solutions and building relationships in the middle of these complicated problems, he has created a fusion of context that helps to us to understand his life's work, as mysterious and hard to explain to those who haven't "been there" as is the hand to those who have never seen one. His captivating description of a slice of Canadian history and the people that created it is the current that conveys the reader down this road of self discovery.

Glenn's account crystallized for me that it is not what he does but how he does it that separates his work from that of others. *Vikings on a Prairie Ocean*, describes the experiences that informed his understanding of how to appropriately provide assistance in the "middle".

There a few key facets of how Glenn works that seem fundamental to his success.

"I gave Bob a booklet, "Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Guiding Principles." I explained that it was a set of ten principles describing key points that anyone attempting to build a process for a problem like this might want to consider."

Glenn's work is grounded in a set of clear principles regarding a process and his role in it. He is anxious that everyone involved understand those principles so that they can take responsibility for building a process. It is their problem and it must be their process. He can also be held accountable for his role in helping them to create a structure for working together.

"Paul? Glenn Sigurdson. Glad to meet you."..."Good to meet you Bob"..."

In every conflict situation there are individuals that through skills, position, effort, and commitment have emerged as leaders in the sectors involved. Further on, Glenn calls them the "players". In a sense, they "own" the dispute. Without their support attempting to intervene and build a successful is neither appropriate nor possible. Publicly engaging scores of individuals at an early point inappropriately raises the stakes and risks for these leaders

and can subtly undercut their leadership, complicating or making impossible any future efforts.

“If there is interest from all sectors would you be prepared to come to an initial meeting to talk about this”

I have never heard Glenn ask anyone whether they would participate or sign up for a process. The invitation is to join other leaders in a discussion about it. Nor have I ever heard Glenn make an assessment of whether or not a successful process is possible. His efforts are directed at bringing together those who “own” the dispute in a context that enables them to make their own assessment of whether to go forward, based on their own interactions.

“...there are no ‘little things’ for what is little to some is big to others”

Or, as he says *“There are many truths”* Perhaps this is one of the biggest lessons that Glenn learned from his fishing heritage. It doesn’t matter what he thinks “should” be the issues or what people “should” care about or how people “should” behave. Fish will behave like fish, the weather will be weather and people will be people. You need to accept the situation as it is and work within it. The purpose is not to change or transform the people or their values: it is to help them find ways of working within the context of their differences. And just maybe, if they are able to learn to work together perhaps some changes in attitude may follow.

“You have to create an environment where people understand it is their problem -- they own it – and they are responsible and accountable for resolving it...”

Perhaps the most fundamental awareness that Glenn that brings to his efforts is that this is not his dispute, it must not be his process and it cannot be his solution. He is intervening in the affairs of others. He can only provide meaningful assistance with their acceptance. He formalizes this intervener status with the clear understanding that *“Anyone will be able to fire me.”*

“Within a few weeks, all the players had agreed to come to an initial exploratory meeting.”

It took time, but Glenn had created a safe place to have a difficult conversation. A small but important step to minimize the risk. No commitment to enter into some major project. Just a few key but broadly representative and respected individuals. No great public attention or expectations. The “players” had been in meetings together before but never in a context where it was possible to have such a quiet candid conversation. Glenn in his quiet individual conversations had created a situation where he could vouch for the intent of each of those attending. Now, they could assess for themselves whether it was possible to work together on solutions. They defined the problem – “Can’t we just agree that we are trying to get more fish up the river and down?” – and they would own the solutions.

Yes, you can learn a lot from fish.

And I have learned that it is how you do what you do that is important. Not what you call “it”!