

"Developing VAN as a Sustainable Grassroots Movement"

Notes from January 2003 VAN Meeting (2nd of two planning sessions)

Tuesday, January 14, 2003, Board Meeting Room, Luther Seminary, St. Paul

Present

Dale Anderson, Georgia Anderson, Sharon Anderson (Facilitator), Shelby Andress, Carrie Bassett, Shirley Benitez, Louise Bouta, Karen Bowen, Maureen Bruce, Julie Bursik, Julia Classen (Facilitator), Carol Daly, Joan Davies, Diana Don Carlos, Alice Evans, Jerry Fagerland, Annie Glasgow, Karen Greer, Kari Berit Gustafson, Susan Hamerski, Jan Hively (Recorder), Paula Holden, Janet Jacobson, Patrick Jones, Nan Just, Barbara Kast, Barbara Laporte, Barbara Muesing, Sue Meyers, Kris Orluck, Robert Pope, Grace Ramseyer, Pat Samples, Barbara Satin, Janet Triplett, Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, Lydia Vol, Steve Wagner, Ronn Williamson

Introductions

Participants introduced themselves, and told about "one thing that captured your attention during the last week."

Results from December VAN Planning Meeting

Sharon Anderson and Julia Classen reviewed the results from the December planning session where the participants had responded to two questions.

A. "What is it about the Vital Aging Network that matters to me?"

Responses in five categories in the report handed out at the meeting:

- Values
- Vision
- Relationships
- Organization/structure
- Key resources

B. "What things should VAN be doing during the next 1-3 years?"

Responses were grouped under eight goals in the report handed out at the meeting::

1. Be an advocate to combat ageism and promote vital aging.
2. Link research with practice and share lessons learned regarding vital aging.
3. Provide educational opportunities for vital aging.
4. Encourage relationships among members of the Vital Aging Network.
5. Maintain and grow the Vital Aging Network
6. Expand public relations and marketing efforts for vital aging.
7. Develop funding to sustain the Vital Aging Network
8. Maintain and expand the Vital Aging Web site.

Before condensing these goals and drafting an action plan, the VAN Leadership Group needed help in thinking about how to sustain and expand the Vital Aging Network Sharon and Julia asked the participants, divided into small groups, to think about their experiences with organizations that were successful in sustaining and expanding effective

participation. The small groups reported results from their discussion about, "What are the key elements of an effective grass-roots movement?"

1. In your experience, what is the key to maintaining and expanding a group?

A. Focus on Mission

- A commitment to the cause because of a felt need. A passion for the need that results in a willingness to give time to the cause.
- Focus on meaningful work around a common purpose, mission or focus. Something bigger than just socializing.
- All of us know what the goal is -- an inspirational, defining experience. There is a need for this work in the world.
- Promote concept of active mind, a full life, likelihood of greater health long-term. "Use your mind!"
- Unique niche: focus not redundant, but with something to use everyone's expertise and to fit everyone's vested interest.
- Commitment to mission, with sufficient flexibility to shift direction on strategies
- Real, authentic, meaningful work -- substance and purpose for every meeting

B. Get People Involved

- Get people involved: mentors sponsoring new members, drawing on strengths.
- Get people to be active and build relationships. Everyone becomes an advocate for the organization, turning customers into contributors.
- Flexibility in how people use their gifts and skills/competencies
- Provide ideas and support so people and organizations can use their own mission and skill sets to advance the work of vital agin
- Have fun, get payback from showing up at meeting.
- Everyone is valued
- Energy
- Inclusive -- meetings in multicultural settings, corporations
- Involves members. Their input is valued and used. Commitment to keep coming - - each contributes -- each is needed and missed when absent
- Track the members. Who are they? If they are dropping out, why? If they are arriving for the first time, why did they decide to come?

C. Provide Leadership

- Strong leadership but also shared leadership so that when one person leaves, others will fill in the gap
- Leadership must be shared. Organization can't be in the hands of just one person. Must reach out beyond the core group
- Good leader who makes everyone feel important, who articulates the mission, who keeps everyone's sights on the mission. Welcomes newcomers and sustains the others.
- Need a plan. Must ask, "How do we make this happen?"
- Plan about how to move ahead
- Awareness of the life cycle of organizations -- capacity to adjust

- No turf-building -- eager to "give it away" to accomplish the mission

D. Obtain Resources

- Must be able to sustain itself, e.g., VAN can't assume it will always have a home in CCE or at the U of M.
- Resources: enough dollars so you don't have to chase money all the time
- Stability, sufficient to assure continuity. It's important to have an institutional memory, keeping track of what's going on to create a history ("myth").
- Resources: support for the budget; dollars, ideas (substance), and in-kind support

E. Promote Visibility

- Celebrate success. People like to be on the winning team. Define short term goals and let people know about accomplishments.
- Visibility: finds purposeful ways to let people know who we are.
- Success -- story of where we've been, feedback on achievements, record of meaningful work

2. Applying these elements, what steps should we be taking to engage others (individuals, organizations, communities) in effective expansion of the Vital Aging Network? How do we sustain and grow the network during the next year? -- three years?

Sharon and Julia then assigned reporters for small groups divided by topic areas. The participants joined the groups that matched their interests. The following reports were submitted for six topic areas (one report, from the Multicultural Outreach group, got lost in the shuffle):

A. Sustaining the Network

- Explain and promote VAN whenever possible. Use tools such as the VAN bookmark and a "Top Ten" list. Every participant should spread the word.
- Encourage relationships among VAN members. Bring inside those who are now on the outer edge of the organization.
- Use name tags at VAN meetings.
- Enable networking through "Interest Groups." Suggestion: include a column on the sign-up sheet for participants to note special interests, if they wish.
- Plan some social gatherings, perhaps quarterly, during the evening or on weekends for those who can't come to meetings during the week. Have a speaker and discussion at these events and time for socializing, afterwards. Although the web and notes are good, the real energy is generated in person.

B. Rural (Greater Minnesota) Outreach

- Seek common ground with other organizations already working in Greater Minnesota -- e.g. SAIL (Seniors Agenda for Independent Living)
- Bring groups together and listen to the people -- in communities where all the young people have left and only elders remain, in communities adapting to the immigration of multiracial and multicultural residents.

- Penetrate the reluctance -- open minds and doors -- perhaps with a video showing how people learn to refocus.
- Make it clear that "vital aging" does not ignore the frail elderly, but recognizes that the frail elderly are a small proportion of the multigenerational whole.
- Show examples of intergenerational activities (e.g., Hope Meadows in Illinois).
- Develop resource base showing what's working. Use the Web site for sharing best practices. Show how to facilitate community change locally.
- Get big employers, Blandin and others to sponsor events.
- Use surveys to ask questions and listen

C. Outreach through Institutions and Organizations

- Identify existing networks and go to them. Meet with reps from institutions and organizations and bring them the message so that they will get involved. Offer them something.
- Each of us (current VAN members) is involved with institutions and organizations beyond VAN. Take the bookmarks and hand them out wherever you go. Note the book called, "The Tipping Point", showing how "fads" start. We need the connector to develop the critical mass.
- Educate and involve large corporations who serve elders such as Medtronic, 3M, General Mills, etc. Get the Vital Aging material and message out to their retirees and clients/customers. Ask them for dollars and/or advertising. Provide workshops for their prospective retirees and for their supervisors.
- Identify community sites where Vital Aging meetings can be held during the day: community centers, libraries, the Y -- and/or nightclubs, banks, etc.
- Develop "lifework centers" at community sites, where people can connect with the Web site, activity options and each other. Maybe it's as simple as saying, "Go somewhere where there is something else going on which would interest older adults, and promote Vital Aging."
- Put together a "Vital Aging Happenings" book of coupons for a discount on a year's membership at the Y, etc.
- Just as the libraries have centers such as "employment centers" (spaces where there are dedicated computers for career exploration and a collection of relevant resources), so should there be "vital aging centers." Programs can be designed to go with the center, such as one-on-one guidance, or information forums.
- These programs could be offered virtually, through computers, although that loses the face-to-face contact.
- Give an award through a collaborative partnership to some Vital Agers in the community.
- Bring elders from other organizations to tell the stories -- because they may know more.

E. Web Site Outreach

1 Year – Short Term Goals

- Show the work of VAN on the Web Site
- Expand educational resources so they meet the needs of a larger audience
- Web site should act as a barometer for the success of VAN

- Track and analyze what information people are looking at on the site
- Need to research what key words people will use to find our site
- Analyze how the Internet is working today vs. when we started the Web site
- Analyze the use of search engines to find the best ones
- People need to be able to read comments about the web site

3 Years – Long Term Goals

- VAN members manage the VAN website
- Make sure all of our resource links also link to VAN from their Web sites
- Develop mechanism to get information from people on how they used the information in the Web site
- VAN Web site becomes recognized as THE Web site for older adults
- People are able to communicate with each other through the Web site

F. (Miscellaneous) Outreach through Individuals, Organizations, Communities

- Question: What does “expansion” mean? Is there an assumption that we want VAN to be “bigger?” Is that necessarily an advantage? And/or does “expansion” mean seeking a broader range of diverse perspectives, e.g., underrepresented groups, rural Minnesota.
- Intergenerational ideology and work are important. Can we build more awareness through events, media, etc? The Vital Aging message is important to all ages, not just the age cohort who typically attends VAN meetings (although there is some range in age among participants). Jim Gambone participated early on and his perspective on intergenerational ideas and his “ReFirement” work were good for VAN. Has that been left behind?
- To some extent, VAN meeting agendas “sing to the choir.” How can the message be conveyed to other audiences with a goal of combating ageism?
- Do some VAN participants come to meetings to help find personal direction? Or do most come because of some professional affiliation? There is a different processing style, although it was acknowledged that people can seek and find both personal direction and professional support at VAN meetings.
- The Web site is great and seems to be gaining importance as THE place to go for information/communication. What about non-techies? Does relying on the Web site conflict with a goal of inclusivity?
- Sustaining good health, and managing finances are two priorities as the topic of aging gets more attention. VAN can help elevate a third priority – intellectual development. Companies that give gold watches and plaques to retirees might be encouraged to give gift certificates for life-long learning (or Career Lifework Services). Reaching out to the private sector is worth exploring.
- Traditional terminology continues to irritate. Terms like “senior citizen” and “elderly” are negative turn-offs to a lot of people and sound discriminatory. How can we find and use terms that have convey a new vision for growing old?
- Work groups as sub-sets of VAN are worth exploring. e.g. reemployment (especially important as retirees see their retirement plans decline in value).

Summary

Sharon and Julia highlighted some items that they had heard in the reports from small groups:

- Focus: All know the message. All explain and speak the message. Expand visibility.
- Energy: Sustain the energy. Continue to build the relationships.
- System/organization: Identify existing networks, especially the key connectors, and go to them. Build on existing links, sites and resources. Emphasize intergenerational activities. Develop interest groups.
- Resources: Train people by regions. Develop a video to tell the story. Provide awards to Vital Agers. Suggest changes in the language to better describe vital agers. Develop a tool/resource kit to tell the story. Use the Web to keep in touch, MN and beyond. Analyze data.

The next step is for the Strategic Planning Committee and Leadership Group to draft an plan. That will be sent out to the VAN listserv for review.

Meetings for 2003

Jan distributed the drafted list of VAN Meeting Topics through June. The next meeting, on Tuesday, February 11, will be held at the Fridley Community Center -- a few blocks north of 694, and east of University Ave. The topic will be "Telling Our Stories."

Tuesday, February 11, 2003, 10 a.m. to noon:

"Telling Our Stories," with

Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, Memoirs, Inc. and

Larry Long, "Elders' Wisdom, Children's Song"

Fridley Community Center (new, hosted by VAN Member Connie Thompson)

(An agenda and directions will be sent out the week before the meeting.)