

Open Dialogue Opens a Headquarters

BY JIM CELER

Omaha, Neb.

Nebraska Headquarters' Members Forum Generates New Ideas and Deeper Trust

Nebraskans have a reputation for being awkward and reserved in the company of strangers and very fond of formality in their relationships with others. But the SGI-USA's Nebraska Headquarters has found a way to change all this.

In 1990 SGI President Ikeda urged SGI-USA to become a model organization based on friendship and dialogue. Soon after that, Nebraska Headquarters began a series of District Leaders Forums. "The motivation was to see that everyone was free to express their ideas," Headquarters Chief Ralph Hicken said. "Also, when the temple issue started, we felt it important to see that everyone's opinions were expressed, to use open dialogue to combat the negative effects of the temples' actions." In time these meetings were opened to group chiefs.

Last year the SGI president, talking further about building a model organization, used the analogy of buffalo and geese. "In a buffalo herd," he said, "all the individuals follow the lead buffalo.... In other words, they merely wait for the instructions of the leader." But in a flock of geese different individuals take turns leading the formation. "It is a model in which everyone takes responsibility, everyone is equal and everyone unites solidly for a shared objective," he said. (*SGI President Ikeda's Addresses In The United States*, June/July 1996, pp. 111-112)

Pondering how to apply this guidance, Mr. Hicken concluded that the headquarters, which he considers a living entity, ought to create its own goals. "I refused to set them myself as headquarters chief," he said. "All the members together could formulate goals."

In the summer of 1996, what were once District Leaders Forums became Members Forums, with the express purpose of determining where the organization should be going and finding ways for all levels of the organization to support the districts and members.

Bill and Nina Schweikart have been participating from the beginning. "The forums are really fun," Mrs. Schweikart said. "You feel like part of the organization, like you have a say in it. And if you feel you're part of it, it makes you more aware and involved so you get involved in everything else."

Mr. Schweikart likes the forums because people can speak their minds. "Sometimes it's contentious because people lay it all out," he said. "Any perceived 'bureaucracy' or 'thought control' is just stripped away. People are fearless. We question things I thought were swept under the rug or we weren't supposed to discuss. Usually when someone's opinion differs from yours you keep your mouth shut, but here everyone listens and talks honestly. It's like a 'hyper discussion meeting.'"

Beth Dean, another frequent participant, feels the forums have helped her human revolution. "You're in a group, having a conversation of ideas — sometimes when we have an idea we want to protect, we get emotional about it," she said. "But here you have to check yourself. It's like that analogy of potatoes rubbing against each other and getting cleaned as a result."

One of the major results of the forums came out of the very first meeting. A woman said she hated being reminded of the schedule again and again "like I was some little kid." But another said she was forgetful and appreciated more than one reminder. Soon the discussion turned to the necessity of being aware of individual personalities. This led to the

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headquarters' first Fall Leadership Conference, last October, with sessions on motivation, sensitivity and the role of district leaders.

In May, also at the suggestion of the Members Forum, the headquarters published its first newsletter, allowing schedules and suggestions for successful meetings to flow easily among districts.

Other issues still in the discussion stage include organizational activities in society and physical changes to the community center to make it feel more like a home.

Jennifer Eddy, the women's division vice headquarters chief, pointed out that "suggestions from the forum are taken quite seriously by the Planning Board. The forum is not just a 'talking group,' something to make people feel better. Suggestions are acted on immediately."

As always, however, the greatest benefits have been inconspicuous. Ms. Eddy sees less formality and more "comfort." "There's real dialogue between members and their quote-unquote leaders," she said.

Mr. Hicken has noticed that people not accustomed to expressing opinions are learning how to; people are enjoying their responsibilities more. "Capable people are becoming very capable people," he said. "There's a lightened atmosphere throughout the headquarters because of the trust and respect accorded each person."

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