

From Theory to Practice

by Terri Goodfellow-Heyer

In the back of my brain, underneath the immediate must-do's of every day living, I have wanted to believe that in the end, I made a positive difference. As my understanding of Holistic Management has grown over the years, so has my desire to create a positive difference in my life. It wasn't always so.

A New Path

In November of 1999, I was the Executive Director of one of Minnesota's oldest non-profits and searching for ways to keep the organization viable. My life consisted of quarterly board meetings (involving 34 directors), producing a regional gardening magazine, and working an estimated sixty to seventy hours per week to demonstrate my commitment and dedication. It was odd that so much of the "busy work" I was doing seemed so pointless. Likewise, the entire staff struggled with understanding the goals and objectives of the organization.

We did things that way because we had *always* done things that way. No one wanted to challenge the status quo. About this time, our board of directors began a major building renovation and major fund raising campaign, and our already hectic life became chaotic. The lofty and ambitious goals were in place, but staff felt little power to make any real changes.

As chief administrator, it was my responsibility to oversee the success of the organization's mission. In fact, I was responsible for the many goals and objectives of the board of directors. My experience over the last four years taught me that the directors on the board were not always interested in reaching consensus on any number of issues and decision-making was done mostly in reaction. Over the years, I saw many members leave meetings feeling disrespected and disenfranchised, while some just quietly resigned.

It was my plan to bring decision-makers (board and staff and volunteers) to the table and begin a dialogue about Total Quality Management™ for the organization. In December 1999, I stumbled across the Allan Savory Center for Holistic Management website. The page on testing one's decisions was an epiphany for me. Over the following weeks I revisited the website, becoming more

intrigued with the case studies and more aware of my own paradigm and potential shifts. I found the information in the articles compelling.

With 25+ years background in horticulture, environmental studies, and landscape design, I was confident in my understanding of plant species growth and habitat, as well as design elements. Before Holistic Management, I believed the problem was the villainous exotics that were destroying our natural treasures of woods and water.



Terri Goodfellow-Heyer has found a way to make a positive difference with Holistic Management.

My first official Holistic Management "ah ha!" came when I realized, we were fighting the wrong war! So many of the articles our organization had printed were on getting rid of a particular plant or pest. It started to seem very silly now. Our mission was to educate, but really we were only educating on those topics that would pass the politically correct crowd of the board of directors.

I made a promise to myself and my organization. We had an opportunity to convey the many diverse aspects of horticulture and gardening, including water quality, soil erosion, energy flow (all those mowers, weed whippers, and power tools!), plant communities . . . the list went on! I wanted to share my new found understanding of "holism" with our members, staff and board of directors.

I was familiar with Stephen Covey and the "Seven Habits" series, so consequently forming the "holistic" goal didn't seem like a big leap for me. Paul Hawken and his book, *The Ecology of Commerce*, had also inspired me, but this Holistic Management stuff seemed to link the esoteric to the functional. My agenda for 2000 was to learn more about Holistic Management. Imagine my surprise and disappointment when I was given an option by the board of retiring or resigning (due to financial difficulties, of course). I realized I needed Holistic Management more than ever, so in 2000 I applied for the Savory Center's Certified Educator Training Program.

Finding a Niche

As I became involved in the Holistic Management movement, I originally saw myself as a bit of an anomaly in the Holistic Management network of ranchers, farmers, land managers because I didn't believe I had a direct link to land management. This was a key paradigm I needed to shift to better manage holistically. Once I was able to cast off my paradigms of what land management was, I was better able to see all the different venues, diverse situations, formats, and multitudes of groups, communities, networks I was involved in where I could use this decision-making framework.

It also became apparent that better decision-making would greatly benefit the community level as well. I had been appointed to the city of Plymouth's Environmental Quality Commission (EQC) in 1998. Back then a dedicated group of community members and staff developed a surface water management plan for our city. My input was mostly about the utility of using plants as buffers, increasing native plant species and biodiversity, community involvement (volunteerism), and education.

As I began my first year of Holistic Management training, I saw the possibilities to get community advisory groups like this one thinking in more sustainable ways and making better recommendations to the city. I won't go into great depth stereotyping our northern culture, but I can assure you the term "holistic" was not seen as a favorable addition to our language. Save words like that for those new age, tree-hugging, species-saving radicals out West (or East or South). It has been hard to

rock status quo but there is a small ripple as we begin to ask more sustainable questions about our city environment.

Holistic Management allowed a framework in which to pose very simple questions. What do we really want? How can we monitor for short- and long-term change? How will we know if we've achieved those changes? What are we doing and why are we doing it? These questions made the engineers on our board very uncomfortable. They wanted to discount the questions as irrelevant, esoteric and completely subjective. I couldn't back down.

As they focused on problems (getting rid of swimmer's itch, the algal blooms from homeowner's fertilizers containing phosphorus, erosion and building alum treatment plants), I kept asking, "Can we agree what we want our community to look like today? Tomorrow? 100 years from today?"

There were times I left these meetings feeling incredibly frustrated. Then something someone else said made sense and our focus turned from problems to root causes. We talked about future generations. This helped move the group out of the "let's kick the problem around for a while and see what's left" stage to a more holistic view of what a healthy, environmentally, socially and economically sound city looks like. In lieu of a city-wide holistic goal, I have a temporary one that I use to test against many of the actions, requests, and plans that come our way. My city will benefit as a result of my training.

Taking It Personally

My real success in using the Holistic Management® framework has been at a very personal level for me. The process of developing my own holistic goal has had a positive influence on my relationships with my family as well as the other less noticeable things in life like shopping (shop for needs and reuse when possible), community service (working at a community level to bring about change), and my landscape (redesigning since it all begins at the soil level).

Most recently I've been able to weigh the pros and cons of accepting a job outside my formal education and decide whether to start a Holistic Management consulting business. The testing guidelines proved most helpful in sorting out what I really wanted, and determining if I was heading toward my holistic goal.

The most important questions I needed answers to and would also use in monitoring involved the social and financial weak link. In considering this new career I needed to be

comfortable with this decision as well as confront a fear that I might fail. After all, I thought I had already failed in being let go by the nonprofit. Wow! Talk about internal paralysis! But focusing on my holistic goal, I began to put one foot in front of the other and realized the benefits that come with deep reflection—a renewed confidence in myself.

But, the financial weak link test was a bit more difficult in considering this decision. I was testing with my partner. He couldn't understand where I was going with the weak link thing—his reality dealt in factual numbers, climbing debt, losing a quality of life we had both come to enjoy. I was talking about the best fit of my resources of skills, talents and expertise. He was talking about making ends meet.

Certainly, finances were a real burden on our relationship. My significant other believed our poor financial condition was a result of lack of income. I believed income had very little to do with our financial condition. We've had some interesting dialogue.

Holistic Management was the catalyst for change that I had been looking for.

We talked about what we wanted out of life, for ourselves and our children, for now and for our retirement years. We discussed the incredible loss of paper dollars for us over the past few years, declining resources and earning potential. We listened and heard the anxiety each of us felt. It's hard to find quality of life when you feel like you're on a slippery slope of Mount Everest, but we did.

The communication between us gave us the strength to see the larger picture of our lives and know these things are temporal. But the difference I attribute to Holistic Management was taking a more active role in what change I/we wanted. If we could truly make decisions that would take us closer to that ideal, what could stop us? The process alone has made our relationship stronger through better communication, more loving, and more understanding.

Monitoring for Life

I think one of the hardest parts of practicing Holistic Management was making

the connection between forming a holistic goal and living a holistic goal. I finally realized that I needed to use the testing questions and feedback loop of monitoring to help me get clearer about what I wanted and to achieve it.

As monitoring has become a guide for my "true north" decisions, I have been able to learn new behaviors that have helped me keep myself from getting stuck in old behaviors or repeating the same mistakes. The power is in my holistic goal and became a turning point in decision-making when I realized I could monitor things like behaviors, attitudes, choices and even jobs to know if they are taking me closer or further from where I want to be. At this point I am very happy with the outcome of accepting a new position with Management Resource Solutions (MRS).

Holistic Management was the catalyst for change that I had been looking for. It has been an incredibly powerful process for me as I realize even some of the minor decisions are moving me towards my holistic goal. I don't need to be right anymore, only clear about what I perceive to be my truth.

I listen better now. I consider as many possibilities or scenarios or variables to help me understand the whole of something I am managing. I don't seem to view "gut reactions" as so important now—only a part of any decision. My experience is that this practice takes time, requires deep thinking and may sometimes produce unforeseen results, which is why the framework includes monitoring.

In training myself to live a more holistic lifestyle, I didn't plan on family members' resistance. I didn't realize how very difficult change is for so many people. But I've become more tolerant over the years of other people's "stuff." I remember my mom telling me for years, "you can't change anybody else." Funny, I thought I could. In the process I've learned to be more flexible in who I am and who I want to become. Most of all, I've learned how great a tool kindness and empathy are.

This isn't a traditional story of Holistic Management and success in land management. It's my story of how I've internalized the concepts of Holistic Management and brought great benefits to my family, my community, and myself. With practice, I've begun to make those conscious and thoughtful decisions to live the life of my dreams. 🌱

Terri Goodfellow-Heyer is a graduate of the 2000 Certified Educator Training Program and lives happily in Plymouth, Minnesota. She can be reached at 763/559-0099 or tghey@attbi.com.