

2009 LANI Community Forum Keynote Speech
"Three Simple Principles to Getting the Job Done!" - Joyce Perkins © 2009

I am very happy to have the honor of sharing this time with you this morning. I am following a long line of celebrity activists, like Ed Begley Jr., Josefina Lopez, Huell Howser and Keenen Ivory Wayans. So when the LANI staff asked me to speak, I asked "are you sure they will want to hear from me?" I thought maybe I should start out with a song or dance to establish my credibility.

So I asked myself "what can I say that will be of real value to this audience, with so varied a group in experience, professions, organizations, missions, etc.?" Then I thought maybe I could share some of the lessons I learned throughout my career and perhaps give you something you can walk away with this morning.

I have spent my entire professional career working in the Los Angeles area. I have seen a lot of the goings on in this city, and we have faced many challenges. Some of you may remember a few years ago when Bill Cosby did a remake of the old Lawrence Welk show called "Kids Say the Darnedest Things". On one show Bill asked a young boy "what happened to Adam and Eve when they ate the apple in the Garden of Eden?" The young boy thought a minute and said, "God sent them to hell, and then He transferred them to Los Angeles."

Los Angeles hasn't always had the best reputation and we have been met with many challenges; earthquakes, fires, riots, and more. Our city is affected by problems both large and small, both global and local. On a larger scale, we are impacted by issues such as global warming, climate change and the global economic crisis. On a more local level we have an inadequate transportation structure, insufficient workforce housing, declining businesses, crime in our neighborhoods, inadequate green space, and the list goes on.

So there are many areas of need, and while it is true that we have come a long way in Los Angeles in addressing these ills, there is still much work to be done, and we can all have a hand in doing this work. So today we are primarily focused on our contributions to the welfare and improvement of our communities and our city as a whole. We want to create safe, livable, walk-able, economically viable communities; free of gangs and graffiti, with access to necessary goods and services, plenty of green space and recreational areas. These are things that can be addressed and influenced by people like many of you with community-driven projects and initiatives.

So today I want to talk about what we can do to help ensure the success of our efforts. The communities we serve, in whatever our capacity, deserve to receive the very best from us. Since the LANI Community Forum is about receiving tools and resources we can take back and use to improve our communities, I thought I would offer what I hope will be useful advice on "Getting the Job Done".

There are three simple principles that I would like to share with you, that have served me well throughout my various careers, in the public sector, the private sector, and

the non profit sector. These three principles can be applied to any endeavor to help achieve success, whether you are part of a private business offering service to the community, or a volunteer organization such as a block club, a Neighborhood Council, a Business Improvement District, non profit organization, or anyone else developing and offering services. However, often in our zeal and passion to get the job done, these principles can be overlooked, and as a result, render our efforts less effective.

These are the three principles that I think are important to our success:

- Get information
- Get a plan, and
- Get along

First we want to get information. Too many of us have a passion for a cause and believe that it is all that is needed to guide us to success. Passion is important - it is what keeps us going when the going gets tough, and believe me, when we are trying to do something for the betterment of people, or to improve our communities, there will be challenges - but passion and good intentions alone won't guarantee success. So we must slow down, take a step back, and take the time to get the necessary information related to our task, because good information will lead to good organization.

What is some of the information we need? First we must understand the environment we are working in. For example: if you are a non profit organization you must understand the needs of the constituency you are serving, have knowledge of the funding sources and their availability, and the current political atmosphere you are working with, and I say "current" because it can change frequently. If in business, you need to have full knowledge of your product and your market. If you are a community organization, such as a block club, Neighborhood Council or committee, you need to know your community's personality and gage the political temperature as it affects that community.

How do we go about getting the necessary information? Well, today's LANI Forum is a good start. We have exhibits from organizations offering a variety of information and services; we have a series of workshops offering tangible "how-to" information, and excellent networking opportunities. Other information opportunities include seminars, extension classes, the internet and informational interviews - talking to people who have been successful in what we are trying to do. We must understand that no matter how long we have been involved in any given area of service, we do not have all of the answers and there is always more to learn - and there is no such thing as a dumb question.

I learned this lesson the hard way with what I affectionately call my "fly by night" business which opened and closed in one year. At that time I did only a part of my homework. I held a couple of informational interviews and took a three or four week UCLA extension course. However, I did not do a feasibility study - I didn't study my market. I was anxious to get going, and thought my enthusiasm and sales

experience was all I needed, but I was wrong, and I lost a lot of money and time in the process. Through that failure I learned a lesson, but it was a hard and costly one.

Now fast forward to LANI. I had to set up a new non profit organization and get it functional while organizing eight new communities and assisting them in creating plans and cost estimates for transit and streetscape projects. Setting up the new corporation and organizing the communities took up a lot of time, but wasn't so great a challenge because I had experience doing both of those things. However, I had very limited experience in design or construction. You might say I had NO experience. In fact, the only experience I had in design and construction was having my house painted.

So what did I do? Well, I did several things. I held informational interviews on design and construction of streetscape and transit projects with as many professionals as I could fit into each day, and I took copious notes. I took extension classes, and read as much material on the subjects as I could digest after my ten and twelve hour workdays. I also surrounded myself with people who had the necessary expertise to help carry out my mission, including my board of directors, and I never stopped learning and asking questions. I still haven't.

So we never stop learning and getting information, because that is the number one principle in achieving success.

Next we get a plan. We need to use the information we obtain to develop an action plan. And why do we need a plan? We need a plan because it tells us where we are going. Whether preparing a business plan for a company or non profit organization, an agenda for a meeting, or work plans for committees or Neighborhood Councils, nothing sidetracks our noble efforts more quickly than the lack of a feasible plan.

Whatever our venture, an action plan allows us to break it down into steps or pieces. That way the tasks seem less complex and are more doable. There is the saying "by the inch it's a cinch, by the yard it's hard". A good plan helps ensure we are moving in the direction we want to go in achievable steps. Using good information to develop a plan, and then continuing to follow and update that plan, helps to ensure good organization and service delivery. It also has a positive influence on our colleagues and inspires others to follow our lead.

I know I am not telling you anything you do not know, but it is surprising how many companies, committees, large organizations, even cities, don't follow this principle, and it is reflected in the quality of their work and performance, and directly impacts their reputation, and consequently their level of continued support.

So we need to get the necessary information which aids us in developing a feasible plan. However, we can be totally prepared with good information and a well thought-out plan, but if we cannot get along with people, it will be all for naught.

An inability to get along with our colleagues and others who are significant to the success of our programs can upset the best laid plans.

Now we all know that it is easy to get along with people who like us, and who share our vision and our opinions. Unfortunately, those are not the only people we have to deal with as we carry out our plans and efforts. It would be nice if they were, but we know that is not the case. What about those who are difficult and contrary? Or the ones who just want their fifteen minutes of fame at your expense?

How many of you have had to go to meetings where you felt like you needed a hard hat? I mean, the meetings were just that contentious! There may be a gadfly at a community meeting who hates anything and everything, or it may be a colleague who just doesn't like you, maybe because of the way you part your hair. Some of these may be people who have control or influence over your program or your money. The fact is, when we are engaging with people, and we all are, at some time or another we will have to deal with someone who is real pill. The question is "how do you deal with them in a way that allows you to achieve your goals"? Well, there is the challenge!

First we need to understand that very often, that person is someone who is just as overwhelmed with work as we are, but just doesn't handle it as well. However, as I said before, these people are all important to the success of our efforts because they are players in our game. So what do we do? What we DO NOT DO is burn bridges. I believe that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and spoken to respectfully. When we are serving our community, in whatever capacity, we must remember that it is not about US. However, this doesn't mean that we don't speak the truth – respectfully, sometimes even forcefully. Rather, it is about dealing with these unpleasant people in a way that allows us to accomplish your mission, deliver our services, and benefit our communities.

I have had a lot of experience in this area, although I am not going to name any names. But I have found that this attitude puts you in a position of power. In following this course, you have maintained your dignity because you have not sunk to that person's level of incivility, and believe it or not, you have put yourself in a position of control, so that you can always ask that person for anything you might need from them to help achieve your goals for your community. Utilizing this principle, I have had adversaries become allies.

So finally, we have these three principles for getting the job done: get information, get a feasible action plan, and get along. This must be a continual process in order to help guarantee our continued success. Together, the three will help us to reach our individual potentials, and coupled with our passion and hard work, they will help us to provide the best service to the communities we serve.

I wish all of you good success in all of your efforts. Thank you.