



3 Linden Rd. Hartland, VT 05048
Tel (802) 436-1277 • Fax (802) 436-1281
www.sustainer.org • efarwell@sustainer.org

Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program

Report on the 4th Workshop • September 26 - 30, 2004 • Hartland, VT

Sustainability Institute (SI) is pleased to announce the completion of the first class of the Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program!

The Fellows convened at Cobb Hill CoHousing for the fourth and final workshop applying systems thinking, reflective conversation, organizational learning and personal mastery to their work and lives. Additional activities included a sweat lodge in the moonlight, wood-stacking, sheep-moving, dancing, an evening of poems and songs with the Cobb Hill community, and a festive graduation dinner.

This workshop ended the formal Fellowship, but laid the groundwork for Fellows to take this work further afield, having deepened relationships with each other, with SI as colleagues, as well as formal and informal “alumni” activities. Mark Spalding described the overall experience as, *“Intense, surprisingly emotional, and a wonderful learning experience. You can expect to find that there are like-minded people from many fields and backgrounds, and that the cross-sectoral learning will exceed your expectations.”*



The theme for the workshop was **Integration:**

- *Integration of skills:* Drawing on systems analysis, reflective conversation, and aspiration when tackling complex challenges
- *Integration into daily practice:* Integrating tools into everyday presentations and conversation.

The week began with each Fellow presenting a change they want to see in the world, a systems analysis about why it ought to change, and a vision about why it is important and what is possible. Peer Fellows and SI staff followed-up with reflective feedback and coaching, which was challenging and affirming to Fellows such as Christina Page who said, *“You did an extraordinary job of making it just fine that the presentations were not perfect while still managing to provide a forum for honest, constructive, invaluable feedback.”*

Guest speaker Sara Schley is a friend, colleague and coach of SI staff, and founder of SEED Systems (www.seedsys.com), a company dedicated to promoting sustainable development in business through the principles of organizational learning, systems thinking, and basic science.

Sara introduced her work on building client capacity and creativity in the areas of dialogue, shared vision, personal mastery, depth coaching, and systems thinking, and in integrating these in support of sustainable development as a long-term, strategic guideline for business.

Following Sara, there was an integrated practice session for Fellows to unite the variety of tools they've learned throughout the Fellowship. Via conversation they had the opportunity to practice how to communicate with someone with radically different mental models than theirs in order to build a shared understanding of what is happening and what needs to be changed. Fellows spent careful reflection time prior to the conversation to lay out their understanding of the underlying systemic structure for a given situation, to clarify their aspirations for changing that system, to reflect on their key assumptions behind their beliefs and to hypothesize about other's assumptions, and to bring their best analysis and aspiration together in a role play conversation.

“Dairy Day” Site-Visit Practicum

As a deep immersion experience in complex systems, Fellows worked in small groups to understand various aspects of Dairy Production in New England. Fellows were challenged to move in various modes: posing a systems question, reflecting, and speaking of long term values.



Starting with site visits to a dairy farm, a small bottling facility, a milk coop, a small organic farm, a grocery store, and a farm activist, the Fellows inquired as to what (if anything) needs to change in the system and analyze how that change could come about. The power of mental models, which had been emphasized throughout the workshop, was reinforced as Fellows came back from their visits seeing the world through the viewpoint of one part of the system and were challenged to take in other perspectives.

“Dairy Day was a fabulous idea!” said Shanna Ratner, *“It gave us a chance to work with our peers in the real world and, as a result, gave me a new appreciation for how many minds and perspectives can enrich an inquiry experience. Debriefing with our small group was challenging and useful as it pushed us to combine our insights into a somewhat coherent theory. We learned a lot as a group of five coming from different experiences and trying to see how they fit.”*

The Fellows were also struck by the externalities of the dairy system, including the positive contributions made by small farms that consumers and citizens do not directly pay for, such as water quality; to large factory farms that are confused with “economies of scale.”

Fellows received a copy of the recently published *Limits to Growth: The Thirty Year Update*, as both a reminder and inspiration to strive for sustainability. This workshop and the first Donella Meadows Leadership Fellowship closed with a reminder from Donella’s 1992 essay “There are Limits to Growth, But No Limits to Love”:

“Nothing is more difficult than to practice goodness within a system whose rules, goals, and information streams are geared to individualism, competitiveness, and cynicism. But it can be done... Speak the Truth. Speak it loud and often, calmly but insistently, and speak it, as the Quaker’s say, to power... And Operate from Love... These are the true keys to a sustainable world.”