

Dreaming up the future together — Mo Douglas wants everyone involved

"We are all afraid for our confidence, for the future, for the world. That is the nature of the human imagination. Yet every person, every civilization, has gone forward because of its engagement with what it had set itself to do."

- Science Historian Jacob Bronowski

She stops talking for a moment. Takes a long, deep breath. We've been at it for a couple of hours now... just shootin' the shinola; solving all Whistler's problems. I have way more info



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than I need for the column, and there's a bike ride that I want to get in before dark. Normally I'd be antsy at this point.

And yet here I am lingering, not really thinking about time, just happy to glide from one subject to the next with my interlocutor. But then that's understandable too. There's so much positive energy — so much good will — emanating from this woman that I really don't want our conversation to end.

Then it hits me. This moment, the very thing that I'm feeling right now, is what makes Maureen Douglas so good at her job. She's a magician at getting people *engaged*. She makes "jumping on the bandwagon" fun and right... even destined. And she does it simply by being herself.

Ah, but that's not as easy as it sounds.

"If you really want people to buy in to what you're presenting, you have to be able to bust through some of the old myths," Maureen explains. And smiles. "Like the one that holds that the person standing in the front of the room is the most intelligent person there."

She laughs. "That's just not true anymore. I mean, really. Who knows *who* knows best today? Consider Whistler — we're lucky here to have a well-educated, highly energized community. And collaboratively, wow, imagine how good we *could* be if we all decided to work together?" She lets a beat go by. "But first, we have to make sure we're listening to each other..."

Which leads directly to her next point. "The power of a shared vision: it can take on a life of its own. It's such a positive experience. I mean, it's truly amazing to see what can be accomplished when everyone feels they're on the same page. That the people "in power" are actually listening to their hopes and fears and dreams..."

And then: "What if Whistler became the most engaged community in the world? What would happen if 'collaboration' became the operative word in Sea to Sky... a place where citizens were actively involved in creating the story of their future?"

She lets those questions hang for a moment. "I think," she continues, "that visitors would come here from all over the world to see what we're doing." She smiles. "I mean, what an incredible development laboratory we'd have. And with the power of Mother Nature all around and that special Whistler element that nobody else has... well, I think that would be a very enticing combination." She sighs. Laughs some more. "I'd love to see that happen."

Remember where we left off last week? Maureen had just settled down in Whistler — same positive energy; same unquenchable passion to make things happen. As Tourism Whistler's Manager of Festivals and Events in the early 1990s, Maureen was living her own dream. "You can imagine," she says, "just how much fun I was having. As somebody who'd developed skills as an arts programmer... I mean, there were so many opportunities here at that time. What a heyday." And she says, she pushed the envelope wherever she could. "We were booking amazing street acts — from Britain, the U.S., Europe. And we made a strategic decision that artists wouldn't pass the hat in the village; that the goal here wasn't to nickel-and-dime visitors to death. Rather, it was about adding value to the guest experience."

She became bolder as her successes mounted. "Music shows, on-mountain concerts... even a festival that showcased Whistler's food and beverage scene (the now-iconic Cornucopia): we tried to push the event envelope wherever we could." She shrugs. "It took us nearly five years before we started making a little money on our ticketed events. But it was never about making a big profit, it was about drawing people to the resort."

And draw them they did. But by 1999, Maureen — now the *Director* of Festival and Events — was ready for a new challenge. So she said goodbye to her old job and started her own event-management company, *MoIdeas*. "Meanwhile, the Olympic Bid was heating up and the folks at Vanoc (Vancouver Organizing Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games) were beginning to realize that they needed someone on the ground in Whistler," she recounts. "And I was lucky enough to hear about the job posting for 'Director of Community Relations.'"

You guessed it: she applied and got the job. Goodbye new company, hello Big Hairy Project.

"I still remember my first day at work," she says. "I was in a meeting with Debbie Smythe, Steve Podborski and fellow-newcomer Tina Symko. And it was obvious from the first that no one at Vanoc had really had time to consider what the new job would entail." She laughs. "So they asked me: 'What do you want to do? How do you want to engage the community?' And we kind of invented it as we went along..."

Her approach was simple, straightforward. "If we wanted local people to trust us, to believe in what we were saying," she explains, "I was convinced *we* had to believe what we were saying too." She wants to make sure I understand. "Putting on the Olympics is no simple thing," she says. "If you don't engage the community, people are not going to connect with it in a positive way. That's why it was so important for our team to understand that we had to *earn* that engagement. Each of us had to be willing to stand in front of a roomful of people and tell the story... with full integrity and authenticity."

And it worked. "By 2009," she says proudly, "the Information Centre had hosted over half a million visitors. And the response was overwhelmingly positive. You could feel the energy in the air now."

A good manager knows how the power of ritual — of marking organizational milestones or new accomplishments — can energize staff and/or team-members working together on a big project. And Maureen is nothing if not a good manager. Take her Olympic Cake story.

"Right from the beginning," she says, "I wanted to put together a series of regular events where we could address issues or celebrate minor victories... as a team. I mean, it took no time for the numbers to accumulate." She pauses. Grabs a breath. "Before we knew it, we had 80 volunteers from the local community working on the bid with us."

But her operating budget was squeaky tight and extra "party" funds virtually nonexistent. So what could she do?

"We kept it simple," she says. "I decided



MAUREEN DOUGLAS

to buy a cake every time we had something to celebrate." She smiles. "It started as a joke, you know. I bought the first cake when Vancouver made the Olympic short-list... I wanted to acknowledge all the hard work that the team had done to get us there." She stops again. Shrugs. "And I guess it grew from there. The cakes just kept getting bigger and bigger. And the community came out every time we celebrated. I think we did over 20 cake-cuttings..."

A cute little story, for sure, but a minor event in the great Olympic scheme of things. Right? Think again. "By year four," recounts Maureen, "the cake event had gotten so 'big' that the folks at (Canada's Olympic TV host) CTV were putting pressure on us to wait until 6:00 in the evening before the 'official' cutting of the cake..." She laughs. "And the reason? They wanted to shoot it live for the Evening News. Crazy, eh?"

Hmm. Shows again what can be accomplished when you blend a pinch of creative energy with a dash of "damn the torpedoes" courage. I think that used to be called "leadership." But I digress.

Today Maureen is back at the helm of her own company, *Mobilize Strategies*, and living and working in Pemberton. "I love putting on events," she says. "I'll always love putting on events. But my professional focus has changed over the years. I'm passionate about public engagement now — you know, good planning, good input, stuff like that. I mean, there are millions of fresh new ideas out there. And sometimes we just can't see the forest for the trees." She stops. Laughs happily. "I love that moment, you know, when you're engaging the community, and suddenly you see that they realize they're being heard; that their input is respected, appreciated... That's such a powerful feeling. That's when magic happens." ■