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Let me say a couple of things before we start with the questions. Sometimes participants don't understand that there is a thing called "meeting design." It's not accidental, it's not thrown together that we sit at tables, that we work in small groups, that the groups are a certain size, that they have certain assignments. The way Kenneth and I work, that can look transparent. It looks obvious. But it's not just, oh, this would be a nice way to do it.

The biggest hit you get is sometimes people say, We don't want panels. We don't want to be talked at. And that's really an underlying request for a different way of doing the meeting, a different way of trying to build knowledge. People know that that old-fashioned way—I call it old-fashioned, but it's a specific way—of having one smart person talk at us for a long period of time, and then we ask that smart person questions. That's only one way to do a meeting.

Part of what Kenneth and I were able to do at the Forum was to start from scratch and say, if we wanted to develop new ideas, if that's the purpose, not to throw around the old ideas we've always had, how should we structure our time together? That might sound obvious to you, but I've talked to lots of people who thought we were just being fun and charismatic. That's why we put people in tables.

But our work is based on a couple of bodies of research. One has to do with how adults learn and adult-development theory. Another has to do with small-group dynamics versus large-group dynamics. Another has to do with the whole body of work around creativity and innovation. And when you stir all that together and you bring a group of people together, that's what you're trying to manage. You're trying to manage the dynamics of the group—who talks a lot, who thinks they're right. But most adults learn by trying things out. We don't learn by reading things. We mix it up with each other. We question each other. We find out who we disagree with. That's the purpose of smaller groups: so that more voices have an opportunity to be heard.

Then the whole creativity and innovation question has to do with keeping people in spaces where they go deeper, where they trust each other, where they take some risks.

There is a thing called "meeting planning," called "experiential learning," and planning for that. I had people say to me, "Oh, that made it more interesting." Yes, hopefully it does make it more interesting than a lecture, but more than that, we think it's how people discover new things. They stumble across things they hadn't thought about before. Someone says something that they hadn't quite heard that way before. It happened a couple times at the Forum, where somebody said, "Aha! I just thought of something!" That "aha moment" is what we're designing to get to.

*Why is it so difficult to have discussions of equity and excellence?*

Partly it's because Americans, as a group, we have very little practical experience talking about things like race and gender and class. They are not common things in our

schooling, they are not common things, necessarily, in our families, they are not common conversations professionally. And we've entered into a time when some people would say that those issues of difference that come up whenever we talk about equity—race and class and gender and disability and language status—who knows how to do it? Who knows how to do it well? There's such a fear of offense. People lose their jobs if they say the wrong things. This is very, very sensitive territory. That's one reason: we don't have the skills or experience or practice.

The second reason is that each of us is invested in the conversation. Everybody's got a social identity—a race or a gender or any of those things. It's not like discussing technology or curriculum, where you have some distance from it. This is a conversation that everybody who comes into the room has a stake in it.

In my work over the last twenty years, I have seen it cross people's faces that it wasn't "accidental" that they went to a great high school. It has come to them that they were players in this game. My experience is, I went to a *tremendous* high school. My parents figured out where they wanted to buy a house so that I could go to a great high school. It wasn't accidental. There weren't that many great high schools to go around, and they navigated it so that I could go to that one. But that's something that people have to struggle with.

It's interesting, in education, how many of us were good students. We don't think about the other students. So many of us were the good kids. I've been tracking that anecdotally for a long time, and it really came to me when I got married. My husband and I went to the same high school, but he was not in the AP/honors track. So his experience of the same place and the same building was very different than was mine. Even though we would look back and say the school was 100 percent black, the faculty was 70 percent black, they did a really phenomenal job with not much resources. But even within that, people had very different experiences. My husband—years later he has masters degrees and a doctorate—he still remembers vividly that he was not a good high school student.

So we've all got these experiences in us when we start talking about equity and we start talking about excellence. We're implicated.

My third reason about why this is so tough is that education, unlike banking or other industries, we were formed by that industry. Each of us, who are fortunate enough to have a college degree or even some advanced work, we were formed by this system that is filled with inequity and misunderstood definitions of excellence. So I think all that makes it tough. It would be easier to not talk about it. All of us have been in those situations, where it would be easier just to talk about something else, and something that's a little more distant, like test scores or something like that.

*Once you've decided that that's what you want to talk about, how do you get started?*

Have people talk about their own experience, either as a student or as an educator, or as a parent, which will really get you incredible stories. Have people start by talking about

some experience of their own where they were worried or there was a possibility that equity was an issue.

I've heard it all. I've heard people talk about their own experiences as students being told that they weren't college material. There are a lot of superintendents in this country who got motivated because somebody told them that they were not college material.

There's a great story about a researcher who did some work in the 60s. She discovered what we now know is pretty straightforward, about financial inequities to districts. And she thought she found something really fabulous: now we can explain why some kids aren't doing as well as others, because twice as much money is being spent on some kids. And she took it in to the federal government, and they said this is not the research we're interested in. We're interested in research that captures that black students aren't doing as well as white students. We want to know how badly they're doing. But this researcher said to them, "But that's not what's really important. What's really important, underlying that, is that the money is so unequal." And the bureaucrat in charge shrugged, and basically said, "We're not interested in that story."

So that fired her up, to have her tell that story. To have a white parent tell a story where they had a school incident where their child was treated so differently because they had a friend of color. This is where you start. I'm convinced that that's the only place you can start. Because people have to find it in their own life and work.

Very often what happens, and this is the "aha" for this, is that people who don't think they know anything about this, or people who don't think they had any experience with it, can have their eyes opened. I do an exercise sometimes if the group is more than 20 or so, where I have people stand on one side of the room and cross over if the statement applied to them. I did it at the Harvard Ed School and I had about 100 people and said, If there has ever been a racist incident in your district, cross over. Ninety-five crossed over. And it was a powerful moment, because the ninety-five said, if this is happening everywhere, then I'm not such a bad person. I don't feel so alone. And also, why aren't we talking about this? And the five people on the other side were like, what am I missing? Is there something about my district that I'm not thinking about?

But again, I think the way to start is to have people grounded in their own work, their own life, their own experience.

*One of the things we saw at the Forum is that once people started the conversation, it started to grow and involve all the inequities there are in society. Because there are so many, the discussion got very expansive. People wanted to take on the whole world. How do you place some boundaries on the issue so that people can focus on what they can affect?*

This is one of those interesting things about group dynamics. My experience is, people need some of that. When you don't have many opportunities to talk candidly about some

of these issues, once you have a chance, among like-minded people, you do need some kind of blow-up, blue-sky, expansive conversation.

At some point, and this is the facilitator's job, it becomes necessary for the energy of the group to try and set some boundaries and focus people on what's doable. There are a lot of ways to do this, depending on the group. One way is to look at immediate short-term and long-term possibilities for action. We discovered some things at the Forum that people could do immediately in their networks.

But I think we don't realize what pressure we are often under to not talk about these things. So when you get a chance, you've got to let people be expansive for a while, and then invite them to narrow it down and then to focus.

At the Forum, we were lucky. We had two things: one, we had people who were activists in their orientation anyway. So even while we are having these expansive discussions, they are looking for things they could do. They're seeing ways it can enrich their research; they're seeing things they can take back to their advocacy organization. That's terrific. They're narrowing and focusing, even if they're not sharing it with the group.

And the other thing I think we had was the opportunity to meet again. If people had projects, actionable items, if things came up. This is not a network that is going to die, necessarily. This was not a "drive-by" experience, as people call it—let's all get together and talk about equity and excellence and then let's go away. I think Howard Fuller said something really profound when he said there are other people thinking about education who do not necessarily think about public education the way we do. And when he gets in rooms with them, he's afraid, and we better get our act together. So I think he introduced some urgency in terms of focusing on identifying what we can do to make a difference, what we can do together that we might not be able to do apart. What are the riches of collaboration?

I'm thinking of an hourglass. All the sand goes into the top, and then it has a narrow waist, and it has to fall through that middle. And that's what we're talking about now. We're trying to think, how do you get people, after they've had a chance to say everything, after they've talked about Bush and capitalism and all that, then we have to start narrowing it down. That's not easy. But most of what happens, happens in the group. And we push people, if you could do three things, what three things would you take up? If you had new colleagues, what three things could you imagine doing with those new colleagues? That sort of thing.

But if it were easy, we'd have done it. I sometimes remind myself of this when it gets all over the place. And that is where the rubber meets the road. So when the President of Brown offered something specific, that's what you want to push people to do, and to examine those critically.

*Having had this experience, when the group meets again, how do you think the conversation will be different?*

There are a couple things, in my experience. One, you never get the same group together twice. There will always be some old people, some new people. After you rebuild a sense of group cohesion, I think a couple things happen. One, we only barely got started with this, but people have to learn to fight. They have to learn to disagree. They have to learn to stop each other when they think they've talked too long. But I think that the basic bonds of that were started. So we have what I would call a stronger group. The group can get to work more intently, more quickly.

I think the other thing is that people can start to plan collaboratively. They can consider moving off of their turf. They can more easily not see a question as something they own. "This is the way I do it; this is the way I propose it or think about it."

It's always difficult to have the foundation people there. Foundations and the press. I've been doing this a long time, and they always sift the vibe of a meeting, because everybody knows they're there, and you've got to speak with them as a potential audience. But over time, a network can learn to manage that as well and still stay authentic.

The big thing that we have to hold onto is that this Forum was intended to bring together people who saw things differently. We were not bringing together the tribe. That's an intense idea. To get them together again, where we might have even more honest talk about differences, yielding up of turf, that's what I would predict would happen next.

*How do you move from discussion to action?*

I don't completely know the answer to that. We could probably generate a number of answers. But I know that, underlying those answers, people need to have a sense of support. We're not heroes and mythmakers anymore. It's not like looking for St. Benedict, as one philosopher said; we're not all looking for the one person with the one right idea. We're not really doing that. We're looking to build communities of people who can effect change.

In the leadership literature, so much of it is on finding the one right person who can lead. That's not where we are in addressing the questions that we're trying to do something about. We move from discussion to action, I think, not by finding the one right idea, but by building the groups that can support one another and move forward. Leaders get picked off. You can look at any district and watch the superintendent and see that happen. So we're trying to build larger structures: networks that are more connected, that can come up with right ideas, not right people.

Discussion to action is the hardest, and the place where most things go off the rails. I'll tell you a story. I got a call today from a billionaire who wants to do something about public education. And so he set up a small foundation and he went to the local three districts—it's a pretty big down, and there are three big districts—and he was appalled at how the district keeps out innovation. That the boundaries around the district are just so

thick and impermeable that no good idea could get in. And so what he decided to was look around the country for programs that he could run.

I said to him, instead, why didn't he try to do something about the impermeability around the district? That's the issue. That's the problem. He comes with resources and good will and he bounces against whatever it is he comes up against, and we don't know their side of the story, we don't know what a poor or good job he did. But if he wants to make a difference, the bureaucracy is the first thing he needs to think about, not the creation of these sweet little but marginal programs.

And that's what becomes our problem between discussion and action. When we decide to move into action, we find unexpected obstacles. And we don't necessarily understand that those obstacles are the work. That's what is worth doing, not, oh, that's hard, let me do something else.