



PHILIA AT BACI

An Experiment in
Organizational Transformation

By Avril Orloff
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In 2001 the Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion embarked on a process of organizational transformation, inspired by the principles and values of Philia. Over the past four years BACI has worked to infuse Philia values and concepts throughout the organization, as well as into the wider community. Significant benefits have been achieved. Still Creek has become a warmer, more welcoming place. People with disabilities have contributed and been recognized for their contributions. Board members and staff report that Philia has changed their thinking in important ways and improved their relationships with others. BACI is increasingly recognized in the larger community for its hospitality and community contributions.

It is clear that Philia has made many advances. However, the process has not been without its challenges. As a result, there has been a loss of momentum in the past year or so. This report is written with two goals in mind: to celebrate the progress that Philia has made at BACI, and to serve as a catalyst for reanimating the process. It begins with a review of Philia's early history at BACI, recalling its original goals and the process that was followed to put it into practice. It then looks at Philia's accomplishments and the positive changes it inspired at both the personal and organizational levels. This is followed by a frank assessment of the challenges that were faced and analysis of what hasn't worked so well. After a brief pause for people's visions of the "imagined future," the report concludes with a review of the key factors in Philia's success to date to provide a base for going forward.

This report is based on written documentation (reports, articles, minutes of meetings, etc.) as well as interviews with people from all segments of the organization – staff, management, board members, parents and the individuals BACI serves. One very interesting aspect of the interviews was discovering what Philia means to different people. Their quotes are included here, highlighted in boxes throughout the report.

Context

The Philia project at BACI began amid a shift in thinking that was taking place within BC's community living movement. Individuals with disabilities were typically regarded, by both society and its institutions, as persons "in need" – problems requiring a solution. The solution took the form of services, with the disabled cast in the role of clients. It became clear, however, that this "solution" created its own set of problems. In treating people with disabilities as clients in need of services, it overlooked the contributions they could (and wanted to) make to their communities as citizens. Moreover, the very services and agencies that were designed to support persons with disabilities set them apart from the larger community and created barriers to their engagement. It became evident that services alone were unable to give people "a good life." Indeed, by relegating them to the receiving end, the service model contributed to their disenfranchisement as citizens.

“For me, Philia tries to capture what it means to be in community: brotherliness, forgiveness, reciprocity. It’s almost like an energy, a positive wave. It’s about taking a breath and realizing what’s really important, and it’s about everybody.”

BACI identified the role that it played in perpetuating the paradigm of people with disabilities as clients in need of services, and in creating barriers between the people it served and the larger community. Discussions with members and their families revealed that people with disabilities were still not valued or recognized for what they brought to the community. At the same time, the community living movement was coming to the conclusion that its critical work was “to change the community. To make [it] a more welcoming, more accepting and more caring place for people with disabilities. To make it a place where people with disabilities can have friends...a place that recognizes and values the gifts that people with disabilities have to offer.”¹

In response to these concerns and aspirations, BACI set out to transform itself from a traditional service provider to an organization where:

- Services reflect an understanding of the new paradigm of disability;
- Individuals with disabilities have an opportunity to contribute and be recognized for their contributions;
- Caring relationships between citizens with disability and the community are nurtured; and
- Values, relationships and actions model genuine caring.²

But how? Jack Styan, BACI’s former Executive Director, points out that there is no obvious managerial process to show how to do this, and organizations like BACI are very much tied to providing specific services in a specific way due to ministry regulations. “Add to that the constraints of regulatory bodies like community care licensing, accreditation, the union environment, employee-employer relationships,” he says, “and you have a very impersonal and clumsy milieu in which to try and build community.” If it wanted to address the issues effectively, BACI would have to look internally at all its resources – financial, human, community, etc. – and see how they could be used differently. “What that meant, though we didn’t have the language for it at the time, was organizational transformation: causing the organization to think and act differently than it was at the time.”

BACI had worked closely with PLAN (Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network) for some years and was aware of PLAN’s Philia initiative. Philia, billed as “a national dialogue on citizenship,” was founded on the belief that the well-being, health and strength of our society requires the presence and participation of all citizens. It operates from two basic assumptions: that everyone has a contribution to make, and that those contributions benefit all of us. Philia envisions a society in which every person, regardless of ability, can be a full and contributing citizen, and believes that welcoming the presence and participation of people with disabilities will revitalize our communities and transform our society.

¹ Styan, Jack. “Infusing the Philia Spirit: The Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion.” Abilities Magazine, Winter 2002, pp. 38-39.

² Report to Vancouver Foundation, 2003.

“Philia isn’t about getting to the end. It’s more about the process and the moment, as opposed to the hard-core, driven outcome. It’s like the cafeteria. It’s beautiful and we’re very proud of it, and people feel very warm and welcome in it. But what I remember most was the process of painting it, the day itself and who was there and how much fun we had.”

BACI’s leadership felt that the values and principles of Philia were congruent with its own and decided to apply them as an impetus to transform itself. Its stated goals were to:

- More effectively support the achievement of “a good life” for individuals with disabilities,
- Play a greater role in unleashing the latent capacity of Burnaby to care for all of its citizens, and
- Return BACI to its roots as a “voluntary organization”.³

Beginnings

BACI formally began its Philia initiative in 2001. After some initial discussions with BACI’s board, Vickie Cammack held a series of meetings to introduce the ideas of Philia to a broader audience of staff, members and families. “We determined that this could not be a board-driven, top-down initiative,” explains Vickie, “but something that would be co-created by people across the organization. That’s why we had the public meetings and broad staff meetings.” At the end of the initial meetings they invited all who were interested in exploring the concept further to come to another meeting, with no further commitment demanded.

“This was done very intentionally,” Jack Styan explains, “because we wanted people to come with internal motivation, as opposed to management telling people they needed to come.” They had no idea who would actually show up. “But what was wonderful,” says Vickie, “was that this incredible dream team showed up for that first meeting – people who represented every segment or microsystem of the organization. We had about fifteen people at that meeting – a cross-section of board, staff, individuals and family members.”

Neither process nor outcomes were clear at the outset. People simply met and talked – about their dreams and aspirations, about change, about the organization and the community. “We didn’t know how far transformation might go,” says Vickie, “so we did not go in with the approach of coming in as consultants. It really was a case of ‘We’re discovering. Let’s go on a journey together.’ And that was the tone of those meetings, always.” They also spent time talking about what Philia meant to them, to find ways of creating shared meaning around the concept. This did not always mean describing it in words, since not everyone in the group was at home with words. At one meeting everyone was asked to bring in a symbol or an image relating to Philia. “We did that,” Vickie explains, “because with words it was hard to include some people, and Philia is about complete inclusion and belonging. We needed to create this shared meaning in a way that had true meaning for everyone there.”

³ Proposal for presentation to CACL conference, 2003.

“We talk about Philia as being community, and putting everybody together so we’re all equal. It’s community. We’re family. I can’t even use the word ‘disability’ anymore because it doesn’t fit for me. We’re all people with different ways of operating in the world and of being.”

Throughout the process, the group remained faithful to a set of basic operating principles. They reaffirmed that this was to be a “grassroots” initiative that would be inclusive in as many ways as possible. They were committed to ensuring that everyone would have a chance to contribute something at every gathering. And they agreed that they needed to spread the word and create vehicles for the stories to be told.

It wasn’t always easy. Several people were uncomfortable with the lack of structure, goals or definition. One staff member recalls that she initially found it difficult to grasp the concept of Philia, “because your mind wants to grab onto something tangible, and there was nothing tangible there – it was all an idea.” Several others remember feeling frustrated at first by all the talk. One person admits that “Philia was really hard for me at first. When I walk away from a meeting I feel like I have to have something accomplished, and Philia isn’t like that. They said we weren’t going to do projects, we were going to dialogue first. But dialogue about what? I thought, ‘Why are we just doing all this talking? Let’s *do* something!’”

Some people were uncomfortable enough that they left. But others began to see the value in the process. Fergus McCann, BACI’s President, points out that in committee work, “far too often you don’t have time to pause, to reflect on what you’re doing or attempting to do. You’re going, doing, sticking to an agenda. Philia gave us time to reflect, and the dialogue and reflection allowed people to be involved more wholeheartedly than they would with a more traditional process, and become more emotionally attached to the concept.” Susanna Uchatius, a mother, was struck by the democratic quality of the communication and the respectful listening that occurred among people of a broad range of abilities. Patrice Pratt, another mother, said that her daughter Jordana came away from the meetings “richer and feeling more included in all kinds of ways,” and commented that after each meeting she personally gained more understanding about community and citizenship.

The group met like this for about three months. As time passed, they began to arrive at a common understanding of some ideas, and a sense of where they wanted to go with the process. After several meetings they agreed on two immediate goals. First, they decided that in order to work well together, they needed to get to know each other better. And then they needed to draft a plan for action.

A day was set aside to accomplish these goals. The President of the organization offered his house for the group to meet, eat together, and develop a strategic plan. Susanna led the group in a series of theatrical exercises to help them bond, grow, and relate to each other in a different way. At first people were bemused by the exercises, but everyone participated, and discovered afterwards that they did indeed feel quite different: “We were all breathing easier and we weren’t in our little boxes any more – we allowed people to enter into our space.” The process was completely unlike anything they

“What first comes to mind is ‘warm and fuzzy’. Community, friends in the community, helping people, that’s what it’s all about.”

had done before, says Susanna, and allowed people to “crack the box in a safe way, to start moving up to another level.”

After that, the group quickly arrived at a vision for the coming year. They decided that their task was “to infuse Philia throughout the organization and into the community.” They further determined that they would accomplish their goals through four core activities: (1) dialogue, (2) storytelling, (3) celebration, and (4) hospitality. What they didn’t realize at the time was how transformative these actions would be. “It started off as a leap of faith,” says Vickie. “We would not have known they were transformative without Philia – that is, without going through the process we went through. And they turned out to be way more powerful than we even expected.”

The group spent many meetings identifying potential ideas and activities in each category. In all, they came up with about a hundred ideas, from putting up artwork to make the building more hospitable, to developing literary awards related to disability, creating an artist’s co-op, and hosting multifaith dialogues. People then put their names to ideas they wanted to pursue, and reported on their progress in the next meeting. Some ideas, like the literary awards, fell off the table. Others, like the multifaith dialogue, were tried with limited success. Still others, like the artist’s co-op, succeeded spectacularly.

The Philia Infusers, as the group called itself, continued to meet monthly, and meetings always included socializing, personal nurturing and food. As one person summed up: “We talk, we laugh, we eat, we catch up, we celebrate each other, we come up with ideas.” Invariably there would be some kind of personal “check-in”. This might involve telling a Philia-related story, relating a “Philia moment” in people’s lives, exploring people’s personal “kryptonite”, or simply sharing feelings. People would also talk about ideas and continue to create shared meaning around the concept of Philia. New activities would be brainstormed, accomplishments celebrated, goals set, and ongoing activities analyzed for what worked, what didn’t work and how they could do things differently. And at every meeting the group shared a potluck meal.

At one early meeting people shared their reasons for being involved with Philia. People’s motivations were as varied as the personalities in the room. Some said they liked the opportunity it provided to be creative and “think outside the box.” Others enjoyed being with people who wanted to talk about “things that can make a difference.” For others it was all about getting to know people better and building relationships: “Philia is friendship, so that’s why I’m here.” Still others spoke of it as a good opportunity to learn more about community and about how to influence change. All in all, there is a sense that something vital was taking place, that people were energized by the process, and that the meetings provided a supportive atmosphere in which people could open up. Describing his feelings about the early Philia meetings, Stan, another parent, sums up: “It was really inspirational. There were people of all different abilities and everyone would have a chance to speak and we would all listen. It brought me to an awareness of equality and listening in a respectful way that I might not have been so prone to do before. I felt a kinship with people, even ones I didn’t really know.”

“Philia is about creating bonds. By opening up the organization and ourselves, we create attachments that will hopefully advance a spirit into community and allow us to become more entrenched and accepted, and give more validity to what we do.”

Accomplishments

In the time since its inception, Philia has contributed to significant transformations at BACI, at both the personal and organizational levels. The first change many people speak of is the physical transformation of Still Creek, from a boxy, institutional “shell” to a warm, welcoming place that feels much more personal and inviting. The lobby, which used to be blank tile, has become a colourful “multicultural advertisement,” with decorations reflecting seasonal and cultural celebrations. Offices have given way to family spaces where people can congregate. The cafeteria was repainted and decorated with art made by people from BACI. A Friendship Garden was built and filled with plants. “Now when you go into Still Creek,” said one staff person, “it doesn’t feel institutional. It’s very personalized, there’s art from the co-op on the walls, it’s a vibrant place that feels like it belongs to the people who spend time there. They’re not simply bystanders in their own building.”

One of the original goals of the Philia Committee was to increase hospitality at Still Creek, and a hospitality committee was created to make this happen. The decoration of the building and the painting of the cafeteria were two activities that came out of this heightened consciousness around hospitality. Another was to make BACI’s membership meetings more welcoming. A greeting crew was set up to welcome members at the entrance. Seats were arranged in a circle instead of classroom-style. The hospitality committee also added name tags and introductions, refreshments, time to socialize, and a raffle.

Amrit Jubal is one of the greeters at the meetings, and her face lights up as she recounts her greeting: “Come on in! Welcome!” At first people weren’t quite sure how to respond, says her friend Chris Tanner. They were used to dry meetings focused on the usual business of reports, motions, resolutions and elections. Now, though, they all know the greeters and enjoy the fun. The meetings have become welcome social events and attendance has gone up markedly. “I’ve never seen a bigger AGM than we had this year,” reports Tanya Sather, BACI’s co-Executive Director. “Members who never came before were there. It’s become much more than just a meeting. People look forward to it as a social event.”

Many other activities were launched in BACI’s ongoing effort to infuse Philia throughout the Association. The Philia Hands Project invited the individuals BACI supports, their families, friends, neighbours, staff and board members to share their stories through art. A drumming circle took root, opening up new paths of communication “and sending out ripples in amazing ways.” Artists Helping Artists was established, an artists’ co-op in which 51% of the artists are individuals with special needs. A Philia poster contest brought people together to illustrate what Philia means to them. A community kitchen and garden were created in one of the homes. A storytelling evening was held, and a Toastmaster’s group formed to help people develop their public speaking. People published their stories in BACI’s newsletter and on its website. And the spirit of Philia was reflected in the change of the organization’s name, from Burnaby Association for the Mentally Handicapped to Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion.

“People that are so-called disabled and people who aren’t disabled can tell their stories and be respectful of each other. And understand that if I tell a story it might not be the way someone else tells it. For example, some people might have to do it in pictures, and some people in words. It’s to help each other understand these differences.”

The second part of BACI’s goal was to infuse *Philia* into the larger community, which meant extending the dialogue, celebration and hospitality beyond the walls of Still Creek. Sometimes this involved going out to participate in community activities. For example, BACI took part in the Deer Lake Lantern Festival with a large lantern of an octopus named Phil, and set up a booth at the Chinese Lunar Festival. On other occasions BACI invited community members to join them in its own activities. Neighbours were invited to open houses and garage sales at BACI’s homes and child care centres. A multi-faith gathering was attempted. Community members were recruited to help develop an art centre at a local school. BACI hosted “Who Cares?”, a three-part dialogue series on caring in community featuring local thought leaders. And some 350 people came to BACI’s summer barbecue.

These are some of the tangible changes that have taken place since BACI began infusing *Philia* into the organization. Underlying the physical transformation is an even more significant change: a change in the way people think and do things at BACI. The repainting of the cafeteria is a case in point. Typically a job like painting the building would have been contracted out to an external company. This time they decided to do things differently. The *Philia* group invited anyone who wanted to help, and for two days a diverse group of individuals, staff and family members sanded, taped, painted and decorated the cafeteria themselves. The result was not only a physically transformed cafeteria, but a transformative experience for everyone who participated. For two days they worked together, sharing laughter, affection, pizza and beer – and even more than that, a chance to contribute and be recognized for their contribution.

The significance of this cannot be overestimated. Many of the individuals who participated were used to being bystanders as their environment changed around them. This time they made the changes, using their own talents and skills. As a result of their participation they were able to take ownership, to take pride in their accomplishment, to say “*we did this*”. It was also the first time some people had been thanked for making a contribution. Amrit is one of those, and her pride in contributing and being recognized for her contribution is evident. When asked how she felt about being involved in painting the cafeteria, she replies, “It feels great!!” And each time she passes the cafeteria she tells the visitor, with a huge smile, “I helped!”

From the painting of the cafeteria, says Jack, “we began to realize that people could contribute and did contribute and that it was important for them to contribute. It showed that things could be done differently. That simple process was really transformational.” From that point on, whenever they wanted to make changes at Still Creek, a similar process was used. It always provided an opportunity for hospitality, for sharing a meal or a beer or simply some time, for having fun, and for participating and contributing.

“To be part of something bigger. To be part of the community.”

Philia has also brought about other changes in thinking and acting. Richard Faucher, BACI’s co-Executive Director, says Philia has made him more conscious of the needs of the individuals BACI serves and more intentional about giving their needs priority over administrative convenience. Laurel finds the organization more “person-centred” now and brings this thinking to the activities she designs, asking herself, “Does the program fit the person or are we’re trying to make the person fit the program?” Jack recalls that although he always tried to keep his door open to the individuals when he was Executive Director, he viewed it as simply a component of the job before Philia. “As we moved into Philia it became much more of a gift for me. Instead of grudgingly giving people time I saw it as a real opportunity to share some time with people and learn from them, and saw that both in modeling and running the organization it was important to take time with people.”

Tanya believes that Philia has enabled more people to take a lead in speaking out, sharing their stories and welcoming others. One person who takes his leadership role very seriously is Gerry Juzenas. Gerry is a founding member of the Philia Infusers’ group and serves on BACI’s board of Directors. For Gerry, Philia is about friendship, making people feel welcome, and especially, telling and listening to people’s stories. He is an informal ambassador for Philia, introducing himself to new people, encouraging them to open up, and (he hopes) inspiring them to take action. He has made great changes in his own life over the years and hopes that by telling his story he can help others improve their lives too. “I think when people share their stories,” he says, “it helps other people speak up and maybe shows them new directions and new choices.”

Gerry also knows how important it is to be recognized for your contributions. He is the proud recipient of several community awards, including the 2001 Burnaby Spirit of Community Award for volunteer contribution, and makes a point of recognizing the contributions of others in the hope of inspiring them to go even further. “At a meeting I’ll shake people’s hand, thank them for coming or give them a certificate, and maybe they’ll think, ‘Oh look, I got a certificate, I did a great job, I’m going to go to the next level now.’ Maybe they’ll come to another meeting or even join the board.”

As people’s thinking has changed, relationships have also changed. Several people commented that Philia had contributed to a warmer, more collegial spirit at BACI. Staff were telling positive stories to each other, people were making new friends and connections, the BACI community was celebrating its accomplishments, and there was a “tone” or “energy” at BACI that wasn’t there before. Patrice tells how her involvement with Philia opened her up to relationships she wouldn’t have been capable of having before. Despite having a daughter with a disability, Patrice admits that prior to Philia she had trouble communicating with people with disabilities. “I was embarrassed, I was scared, I didn’t know what to do,” she says. “I would be very polite and nice, but I wouldn’t spend much time with them to understand who they are and what they’re doing. But Philia changed that. I feel like I can communicate with anyone now, and Philia has helped me form relationships that I wouldn’t have had before.”

Sometimes communication takes place in unexpected ways. Barbara Karmazyn, known to many as “the drum lady,” relates a moving story of two women in her drumming circle who used drums to work out their anger at each other. As the conflict escalated, Barbara suggested putting their

“Thinking about Philia, you think about the tenets of hospitality and community and reciprocity, and it’s all interconnected.”

frustration in their drums. “All of a sudden Woman A said ‘I’m. Angry. At.’ And said the other person’s name – all on her drum, in perfect rhythm. And the other woman did the same. They drummed back and forth until I noticed a little smile on one of their faces and I asked how she was feeling, and she drummed back, ‘I. Feel. Great.’ And the other woman did the same thing. Finally I asked if there was anything else they needed to say. And they both apologized, ‘I’m. Sorry.’ And each other’s name – in rhythm. The drumming opened up whole new paths of communication.”

Relationships did not change only within BACI’s walls. Philia also contributed to improved relationships with the larger community. Jas Sidhu, manager of BACI’s children’s services, took what she learned from Philia back to the child care centres where she worked and encouraged the staff there to invite their neighbours in, “tell them who we are, because they’re in a facility where they’ve never spoken to anybody.” In one of their centres they started connecting more with the seniors and doing drumming classes with them. “These are things that never really crossed my mind until I came to Philia and really thought about community.”

Rebecca Doran, a residential coordinator for three of BACI’s homes, expands further on the theme of neighbourliness: “At one house they had a neighbour they’ve known for over 15 years but they had never invited her over. So we had an open house and invited the neighbours and it was wonderful to see them coming over with their cookies... Now every once in a while we’ll come back and see that our grass has been mowed – someone next door has come over and mowed it, just to be neighbourly!”

An important feature of BACI’s changing relationship with the larger Burnaby community was the recognition that the relationship had to be reciprocal. In much the same way that people with disabilities have typically been viewed as clients in need of support and services, social service organizations are also seen as requiring support – from governments, foundations, and the community at large. But just as individual citizens are expected to contribute to society, so must organizations – and their representatives – contribute to their communities. “The dialogues we did in the community made me realize how important it was to be a part of the community,” says Jack. “Not just going out to see what the community has to contribute to our organization, but going out as a representative of that organization and contributing to community.”

It is evident from these stories that Philia has had an effect at many levels: personal, social, organizational, and in the community. It has changed the way people think, feel, do things and relate to others. And everyone involved with Philia takes something different away from it. For one person, it’s the realization that community is not just a physical place but a psychological one as well; above all, she says, “community is relationships between people.” For another it’s about valuing all people as citizens regardless of ability. For others the value of Philia resides in the potlucks and parties where all kinds of people can get together, enjoy each other’s company and swap stories. And for still others, Philia is a useful organizational tool for engaging people within the Association and opening BACI up to the larger community.

“Extending yourself, in your community, and taking that step to reach out to whoever is within that community. Making that gentle contact. And respectful listening. Understanding that what anyone has to say is important, and that nobody is less important than you.”

Would these changes have come about without Philia? Opinion is mixed on this, and it seems that an important factor in Philia’s success is that it came along at the right time. That is, people’s thinking was already evolving, and Philia’s concepts and values meshed well with the new ideas that were emerging. Nevertheless, many people insist that Philia played a big part in transforming both their personal thinking and the way things are done at BACI. “The personal changes that happened for me wouldn’t have happened without Philia,” says Jas. “Philia gave me a chance for self-reflection.” The new relationships they developed with neighbours wouldn’t have happened if people hadn’t “embraced Philia and brought it back,” adds Rebecca.

“What came first, the chicken or the egg?” asks Patrice. “I don’t know, but I certainly think Philia played a huge part in changing things, because it got people thinking outside the box about how to involve people and make them feel welcome.” Without Philia, says Tanya, “we probably would have brought someone in to paint the cafeteria. And we would have completely lost the affection and the fun times and the contributions and the memories that we got from doing it ourselves.”

It was Philia that stimulated Jack to begin to move out into the community. “I began to see the value of taking time on a regular basis to contribute to the community. It sounds simple, but it took me fifteen years to get to that place, and it was largely as a result of Philia that I came to that way of thinking.” And he is sure that the dialogic process they employed was critical: “If we had begun actions on the first day, I think we would have done things quite differently and replicated many mistakes we had made at a management level.”

Some people feel that Philia is well embedded at BACI now, that it has permeated the grassroots and will continue to grow in different directions. The introduction of a different way of thinking and acting, they say, has changed BACI forever and the organization will never go back to the way it was before. The transformation is far from complete, however. Perhaps that’s the nature of transformation – that evolution is continuous and never complete – but there are challenges inherent in the process that could stand in the way of further progress. The next section looks at some of the challenges to organizational transformation on the Philia model, and the things about Philia that people feel are not working so well.

Challenges

As we have seen, Philia has made significant advances at BACI. But lately there is a general sense that the project has lost momentum. Attendance at Philia meetings and events has dropped off in the past year or so. Fewer people are showing up, and those who continue to attend are, for the most part, the same people who have always been involved.

**“Philia is not separate from BACI. It stands for what’s beyond the word:
what you do, what you talk about, how you change.”**

When asked where the problem lies, certain themes cropped up regularly in people’s responses. One was that communication about Philia has fallen off. One of the four core activities for infusing Philia throughout the organization and into the community is storytelling. Not just people’s personal stories, though that is an important part of it, but also the story of Philia at BACI. This is an important part of the lifeline that keeps Philia alive. “You need to create ways in which the stories are told and the lines are made visible so that people can see the connections,” says Vickie. “That’s when the river starts to happen. It’s using every vehicle of communication – the Association newsletter, the staff newsletter, having Philia on every board and staff meeting agenda – it ultimately needs to be taken to that level.” But this has not happened. And even where Philia is mentioned, the connections are not always made. For example, BACI’s newsletter still has a “Philia” page, but in recent issues it contained no actual reference to Philia activities, and no discussion of Philia ideas.

Another concern, voiced by many people, was that the steering committee has become more of a social group than a social *action* group. To be sure, for some folks the motive to attend is primarily social. What attracts them is the opportunity to get together over food, whether at a meeting, an open house, a barbecue or a Christmas-time gift exchange. One could say that for these people Philia is first and foremost about friendship, and the meetings a place where they put friendship into practice. “That doesn’t necessarily have less value,” says one person, “because it’s still inclusive, they still value personal connections and recognize people’s contributions. But the group’s focus has narrowed. It’s changed from being a group that wanted to transform the organization to a group that appears to be satisfied with change at a personal level.”

One reason for this, perhaps, is the fact that it is some time since anyone new has joined the group. “There weren’t barriers to people getting in,” says Jack, “but I don’t think we were actively hospitable in going out and inviting them. Hospitality means being welcoming when people come, but it also means extending an invitation. I think we did the former well and the latter poorly.” One result is that Philia has become associated with a small group of people that feels, to some others, like a clique from which they’re excluded. Some had the impression that people outside the Philia group were not welcome at its potlucks, while others felt left out of a Philia retreat to which non-Philia people were not invited. “It seems like a club that you have to be asked to join,” one person commented. “And if you don’t get asked, then you don’t come.”

Another result of the “socialization” of Philia is a sense that ideas are not flowing as they were at the start. “I feel as though the Philia meetings have become a bit dried out,” says one staff member. “It’s lost its energy,” says a parent. “There’s no inspiration.” Philia is a dynamic process, not a static thing. In order for it to retain its vitality, it needs a constant infusion of ideas and an ongoing effort to create shared meaning. If that is not happening, it becomes drained of energy and purpose, and risks being reduced to just another program. Indeed, people often talk about Philia as though it were a separate activity rather than an integral process. “People say they went to a ‘Philia thing’,” notes Lyn King, an original member of the Philia committee, “but it’s often like saying ‘I went to special bowling’ – it just becomes another activity and doesn’t go any deeper than that.”

“Philia is friendship.”

Successful Philia activities, too, can become programs despite people’s best intentions. The drumming circle is a case in point. It was first introduced as an activity in which everyone could participate, to help people think differently and be creative in a different way, like Susanna’s theatrical exercises. And it was a truly inclusive experience. “It was a perfect Philia activity,” says Vickie. Everybody had fun, everybody was learning, everybody could do it. It really worked.” It was such a success, in fact, that Barbara, the “drum lady”, was hired to deliver drumming as a program within the organization. Which is exactly what Philia was trying to get away from. Jack laughs at the irony of the situation: “In trying to make BACI a more caring organization and trying to get away from everything being paid, as people came along who did that – we hired them!” Vickie is very clear that the drumming circle is something they wanted people to have. “The drumming is fabulous, and Barbara understands community in her bones. She was hired with the best of intentions. But the essence of the inclusion, the belonging, is missed.”

Barbara herself agrees, and would like to find a way around her drumming becoming a program. “And yet,” she muses, “it’s a great program and people are getting something from it.” Just as they are from Laurel’s art and craft programs, from the classes BACI offers, and from the many other programs that BACI runs. But programs are something apart from an organization – something the organization offers people – while Philia is intended to be part of its very fabric. The word that is used to describe the process of integrating Philia is instructive: we talk about *infusing* Philia into an organization, a community, society. This conjures up the image of a tea bag being steeped in a pot of water. At some point you take the tea bag out – but the water is permeated with the flavour of the tea, which has been fully absorbed. Just so with Philia: if the transformation is successful it’s no longer a separate program, but “part of the air people breathe and the water they drink.”

It’s a challenge, however, to retain the fluidity of something like Philia within the confines of a large organization. BACI is a multi-million-dollar-a-year organization with some 300 employees, providing different levels of service to several hundred people with high-level needs. “We have unions, systems, things we need to accomplish in terms of the business of an organization like this, and outside stuff coming at us all the time that we need to deal with,” says Fergus McCann. “That’s the tension with something like Philia.”

At the same time, BACI is going through a process of accreditation, which is structured, prescribed, policy-driven and impersonal. This is in stark contrast to Philia, which is unstructured, intuitive, relationship-based and personal. When faced with something new like Philia, the tendency of bureaucratic structures is to try and fit them into the structure. “And how you fit,” says Vickie, “is by becoming a program. We do that because that’s what we know how to do. We know how to make programs. But we don’t know a lot about how to create true belonging within bureaucratic structures.”

Finally, there is the ongoing question of how to become more fully integrated into the larger community. Philia has inspired several community initiatives, as we have seen, and these efforts have helped build stronger relationships between BACI and the rest of the community. But most of the

**“Philia takes away the blinders that we usually walk around with.
It enlarges your peripheral vision. So instead of sitting there in your insular little world
you can reach out and make an attempt to connect.”**

people interviewed for this report felt that more could be done in this area, and that getting out more into the community would breathe new life into Philia. “We need something bigger than just the group,” said one staff member. “Not just getting together for ourselves, but getting together to do something for the community as a group.”

In short, for all of Philia’s accomplishments to date – and it must be stressed that they are both many and significant – BACI’s transformation remains incomplete. Vickie compares Philia’s progress to that of a stream that has been gathering momentum and going where it flows easily. It’s now beginning to reveal where it doesn’t flow so easily, with the result that Philia has become “a trickle instead of a river.” To get the river flowing again will require a new infusion of energy and creativity, a renewed process, and probably some new people to re-inspire the process. This should not be difficult. There is still a lot of enthusiasm for Philia, and no shortage of ideas for taking it to the next level. Before moving on to practical recommendations, though, let’s pause for the long view and imagine what the world would look like if Philia were successful.

The Imagined Future

Sometimes in the focus on the immediate tasks at hand the bigger picture gets obscured, i.e. what are these actions in aid of? The “big vision” of Philia remains the same: creating a more caring organization and a more caring community that welcomes the presence of people with disabilities and recognizes and values their contributions. But what does that look like on the ground? In trying to answer this question it can be useful to imagine the future: what does the organization/community/society actually look like if the vision is realized? What changes have taken place, five years down the line, if Philia’s goals have been achieved? Here are some of the answers people gave when asked to paint their picture of the imagined future:

- “Transformation doesn’t necessarily look the same everywhere in the organization but the ideas have permeated. The fundamental value that people with disabilities have something to contribute is shared throughout the organization and actions reflect that. You can go anywhere in the organization and feel that you’re welcomed, that the outside is welcomed, that the boundary with the outside world is more permeable.”
- “We’d have an ethical bean coffee house in the basement staffed by people we support. We’d have small enterprises working out of a number of venues in conjunction with ventures we already have. Our homes would be an open, integral part of community. We wouldn’t be searching for more people to sit on our board but rather, we’d have to be picking. We would have elections at board meetings instead of acclamations!”
- “Success, for me, is returning to core values. It’s making sure that everybody’s story is told in one way or another and more people hear them. It’s people naturally doing the right thing not because of systems or rules or because they were asked, but because that’s their values.”

“Philia is not about coming out with something. It’s about dialogue, talking about community. For me personally it was a chance for self-reflection, a chance to talk about what community means to me.”

- “My vision is that the wall is broken down between the people in here and the people outside. That we lose the labels and break down stereotypes and fear. That people learn to relate to someone who is different from them. That we’re really integrated into the community – a combination of reaching out and bringing others in.”
- “BACI is part of the community and the community cares about what goes on inside its doors. People know who’s there and there isn’t a line around ‘those disabled folks there’. And Philia would assist in reaching out to the community and making people understand.”
- “Everybody would help each other and it wouldn’t matter who you were. You would have meals together. You would forget that you’re disabled. Everybody would be happy to be together. People who are disabled, people who are not disabled, everybody just helping each other. And to be able to live in your own home and have the things you need in it.”
- “In my perfect world everybody would take the time and see people’s gifts and value them for what they are. There wouldn’t be any more attitudinal barriers. We can overcome the physical barriers easily – put in curbs and elevators and so on – but if nobody lets you use the elevator or blocks the curb or if they just don’t think, then what’s the use? We need to overcome the attitudinal barriers.”
- “If we really had caring communities where people were included, maybe BACI wouldn’t need to be here. People would be out and about in their community, they’d be supported within their own networks, we’d all look after each other. Maybe BACI would be more of an advocacy agency instead of a service provider. In the meantime we could be an example of a place where people feel good and want to come.”

Moving Ahead – Sustaining and Renewing

What will it take to bring such a future about? As has been clear from the outset there is no “recipe for success,” and it would be counter to the spirit of Philia to lay out a set of objectives or a prescribed course of action. The best answers will be generated, as they have up to now, through dialogue among interested and passionate people. Happily, though, there is a firm foundation on which to build. Most people interviewed felt that the original process BACI followed was fundamentally sound, and that moving ahead was more about **renewal** than **reinvention**. With that in mind, this final section reviews the key factors in Philia’s success to date, to provide some touchstones for moving forward. Several people interviewed also had suggestions for action, which are included for consideration.

1. **The elements of the original process were sound.** The process began with information and invitation, stimulating discussion within a broad group of people and then inviting people into more intimate discussions. It was fully inclusive, involving self-advocates, families, staff, board members and management. The group took time to get to know each other and build caring relationships. Meetings included time for reflection, sharing, telling stories and celebrating

“Philia gives me the opportunity to tell stories and to share with people what kind of person I am, and what I contribute to the community.”

accomplishments. Ideas were generated through dialogue. Actions flowed naturally from these ideas and were grounded in the larger vision of creating a more caring organization and a more inclusive community.

- *Suggestion:* Restart the process the same way, beginning with large-group discussions, convening a smaller steering group of 10-15 people, and then carrying on as before.
 - *Suggestion:* Make room for new people to become part of the steering group, and extend personal invitations to people who would be especially valuable to the process.
2. **The four core activities have been transformative beyond anyone’s expectations.** As noted earlier in this report, the actions of dialogue, storytelling, celebration and hospitality have proven to be even more powerful than expected in infusing Philia and transforming the organization.
 - *Suggestion:* The restarted/enlarged group should consider reviewing these four core activities, and possibly rekindling and extending discussion and action around them.
 3. **Storytelling is Philia’s lifeline.** Telling the story of Philia at BACI keeps Philia alive in people’s imagination. It helps people understand Philia better by showing the links between Philia and the changes taking place at BACI. It inspires support for Philia values and activities both within the organization and in the larger community. It provides a platform for people to tell their personal stories. And it shows that transformation is possible.
 - *Suggestion:* Continue to encourage people to write (or record) their Philia stories and publish them as widely as possible: in staff and Association newsletters, in the minutes of board and staff meetings, community newspapers, Abilities magazine, etc.
 - *Suggestion:* Use the National Film Board project currently underway as another way of getting the story out.
 4. **Inclusive communication takes many shapes.** One of the great strengths of Philia is its success in using innovative methods of communication to create an inclusive environment. These range from using plain language to telling stories in pictures to communicating through drumming to engaging in theatre play. Putting cameras in the hands of people with disabilities provides yet another avenue of communication.
 - *Suggestion:* The renewed Philia group could take the lead in exploring all forms of dynamic communication and introducing them throughout and beyond the organization.
 5. **New ways of doing things stimulate new ways of thinking.** Even new ideas can fall into routine and become stagnant. One way Philia prevents that is by trying different ways of doing things. The drumming circle created new ways of interacting. Susanna’s theatre exercises pulled people out of their boxes and broke their normal patterns. Doing things in new ways creates new choices and new possibilities for thinking and action.
 - *Suggestion:* Take time to incorporate creative processes into meetings and retreats. For example, Susanna suggests introducing games into meetings, or taking the tables and chairs out of the room to remove barriers and get people interacting differently.

“When I think about Philia I see a group of people meeting and talking about friendship, and friends talking about what’s important. I see a group of people talking around a coffee table or a tea table about how they feel. And not formal.”

6. **Philia depends on a balance between strategy and “flow”.** There is a paradox at the heart of Philia. On the one hand is the need to be strategic in defining the vision and creating the conditions for achieving it. On the other hand is the need to let it “flow”, for the ability to accommodate change, surprise and mistakes is part of the emergence that is integral to the process. Managing the tension between competing processes is achieved, as Vickie puts it, by “consciously, everywhere, building in space for reflection within the organization.” The discussions and meetings, the sometimes difficult processes, provide a space for the active knowledge construction and reflection that are critical to realizing the vision and maintaining the delicate balance between strategy and flow.
 - *Suggestion:* As a part of the reanimation of Philia, have a strategic action and planning day to explore potential activities and goals.

7. **Visionary people drive the vision.** Visionary projects like Philia are most successful when they are inspired by visionary people. Many people feel this visionary spirit is currently lacking in BACI’s Philia initiative. The result is that people fall back into their ordinary ways of doing things and Philia sometimes seems like just another program.
 - *Suggestion:* Bring Vickie back to lead the process, or someone else from Philia with, as one parent put it, “a real mission and a vision who can keep it in front of us and put wheels on it.”

8. **There is a real commitment to Philia at the leadership level.** The Executive Directors, the board and the senior management team have all been supportive. Not all participate actively in Philia and they do not control the process, but they are committed to the vision and are willing to use their influence to further its goals.
 - *Suggestion:* Encourage all levels of BACI’s leadership to reaffirm their commitment to Philia and to participate in the re-visioning process, at least in the initial stages. Senior management could also work with staff to support implementation of Philia throughout the organization.

9. **There is a balance between external and internal focus.** One of the core goals of BACI’s Philia initiative was to infuse Philia (a) throughout the organization and (b) into the community. In addition to Philia’s internal work, BACI has both hosted and participated in community activities, thus nurturing relationships outside its walls and thinning the boundary between the organization and the community. As Jack put it: “To really transform the organization, you need to infuse it so much into the community that you don’t know when you’re part of the organization and when you’re simply part of the community. It’s a process of changing people’s mindset.” Expanding relationships with the community was a priority for many of the people interviewed for this report, and they offered several suggestions for future activities.
 - *Suggestion:* Hold more activities in a community setting. For example, arrange to do scrap-booking in a scrap-booking store, or have gatherings at Myles of Beans coffee house.

**“Philia is citizenship and accessibility and inclusiveness all rolled into one.
It’s community, caring for others, making a place where everyone feels welcome
and everyone can get there and everyone can make it around that space.
It’s letting everyone contribute as they are able and being recognized
and honoured for those contributions.”**

- *Suggestion:* Susanna spoke of a theatre space that was available for rent and thought it would be an ideal place to run theatrical and other activities.
- *Suggestion:* Continue hosting activities that invite the community in. Examples: host another dialogue series or a philosopher’s café; invite people from the community to join the BACI drumming circle; run theatre workshops; start a community choir; continue Who Cares series.

10. **BACI is an important resource to the community.** People are enthusiastic about activities that allow BACI to offer its services to the larger community. Not only do such activities give people a perfect opportunity to contribute, but they turn the service model on its head by enabling people who are usually on the receiving end of services to provide valuable services to others.

- *Suggestion:* Meet once a month to decide collectively what the organization could do for the community, e.g. helping in a seniors’ centre or a food kitchen, organizing a “clean up Burnaby” day.
- *Suggestion:* Invite people from the community to training sessions hosted by self-advocates on safety issues such as earthquake preparedness, perhaps in partnership with the city or local businesses. “This would let us connect with the community in a hospitable way,” says Richard, “at the same time as giving our people an opportunity to be leaders in the community and a resource to the neighbourhoods where we have homes.”

11. **Inspiration is the catalyst for change.** Organizational transformation is not a linear process that starts at Point A and ends at some hoped-for Point B. Rather, it is an ongoing process that constantly shifts, adapts, reassesses and changes course as necessary. As such, the transformation is never complete, and it probably shouldn’t be, since the only time a thing stops changing is when it’s dead. The challenge, then, is not to “finish the job” but to ensure that the right kinds of changes take place. This is done not by using the power structure within the organization or by trying to “motivate” change, but through inspiration. Philia is committed to acting in ways that respect the inherent capacity in each individual, and seeks to provide people with an opportunity to reconnect with their “spirit” – their source of energy and wisdom.

- *Suggestion:* Put together a small group of people whose task is to inspire change and allocate a sum of money each year to help them do it. Perhaps hire a staff person who understands and models Philia values to be the catalyst or animator. Ensure the embedded filmmaker and her activities are integrated into this leadership team.

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