

Creating Our Common Future: Transcending the Limits of Problem Solving

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Why do you live here? What is it about this place, this province, your region or your community that truly matters to you? What do you love most about it? What do you want it to look and be like in the future?

We rarely think deeply about these questions. Perhaps we were born here and take it for granted. Maybe we moved here, pondering these questions before we did so, but are now so caught up in our day-to-day lives that we don't have time. Or maybe we're just passing through, spending a few months or years before moving on.

When we take time to answer the question of why we live here, we all come up with different answers. Some of us live here because we love the natural environment. Some because we like the vitality of the big cities. Some because we like the sense of community in the small towns. Some think there are economic opportunities here. Others think it's a good place to raise kids.

When the population was smaller and resources seemed unlimited, things in general were simpler. Those with different reasons for being here could live with each other, if not harmoniously, at least without conflict. People went their own ways,

and things took care of themselves. Conflict was rare, and when it occurred, it could usually be ignored or resolved over a cup of coffee. But it is not that way anymore.

Things are getting more complex, more confusing. The province is caught up in the waves of change sweeping across the globe, and we don't yet have the skills—as



Photo by Jeff Reading

individuals or as a community—to deal with such change. As things change, complexity increases and we experience more contact with each other. And we find ourselves embroiled in more conflict.

The first and seemingly obvious reaction to increasing conflict is to try to resolve it. But problem solving and conflict resolution, although often needed, are not the only ways to deal with change. And they are not the ways to create the future we most want.

Throughout the world, lines are being drawn between those who want more change and those who want less. But the real question is not, Should there be change? The question we need to ask is, What kind of change is best for us, for the Earth and for our unique corner of it? Shortly, we shall see that there are powerful processes that complement conflict resolution and transcend problem solving. We have yet to master these processes, but with them we can create the kind and quality of change we truly want.

This brings us back to the question, Why do you live here? Will the changes currently sweeping over us make our province more like why you live here or less? Are you creating the future you truly want? Or are you settling for whatever future the forces thrust upon you?

Dealing with Change

Change is inevitable, but the nature of change is not. We are not necessarily at the mercy of external forces and changing circumstances. We are free to choose and to bring into being the kind and quality of change we want. We can—if we know how—work with those forces to create the future we most want.

To avoid being pushed around by external forces and to create the future we most want—independent of change and circumstances—we must do three things:

1. Clearly specify and agree upon the future we most want (that is, where we want to end up)
2. Clearly see and agree upon where we are now (that is, our starting point)
3. Invent a variety of ways for getting from our starting point to our goal

Sounds simple, but it's not, because most of us know neither what we truly want nor where we are really starting from.

We lack a clear vision of the future we want. We may have vague notions about a better future, making more money, preserving the environment or sharing resources. But we don't know what achieving those goals would look like.

Nor do we accurately or objectively describe current reality—where we are now in relation to where we want to be. We exaggerate the positive or negative aspects of our reality. We omit what we don't like and what we fear. We generalize from single examples to broad applications. The most damaging thing we do is judge rather than describe events and behavior. Read the letters to the editor in the local newspaper, and you'll quickly see that people have widely varying views on what actually happened at a given event.

Then, even though we are not yet clear and agreed upon either our goal or our starting point, we argue about how best to get from here to there. No wonder we fight with each other.

A biblical proverb says, "Without vision the people will perish." The whole truth is that without both clear vision and an objective view of current reality, we will find ourselves swept along by circumstances, drifting like corks on a stormy sea of change, unable to create the change we truly want. As a result, our actions will tend to focus on problems and short-term solutions, stopgaps based on shaky compromises and intended mainly to reduce conflict.

Conflicting forces intersect in this province: forces for development and growth, forces for preservation of nature and resources; forces for more government, forces for less government. These forces give rise to patterns of behavior, some of which we define as problems. Issues such as logging, mining, urban development, and use of wetlands and agricultural land become seedbeds of conflict.

Often, getting rid of the conflict surrounding an issue becomes more important than actually solving the problem. For example, several years ago a coalition of environmental groups mobilized to stop pulp mill pollution in Georgia Strait, near Vancouver. Protests were held, frightening pictures of raw pollution and dead sea life were displayed, and angry voices were raised in speech and song.

The strategy seemed to work. Government and business leaders made stirring public speeches about the need to stop pollution and clean up the Sound. The government passed stringent antipollution laws and gave the mills a deadline to meet them.

To most, it seemed that the protestors had won their battle. The pressure was off; the conflict dissipated. Activists went back to their regular lives or turned their attention to new

issues. However, with the pressure off and public attention diverted to other issues, the government and the pulp mill operators quietly carried on much the same as before. A few months later, a short article in the local newspaper announced that the ministry of environment was not enforcing the new regulations and had extended the deadline for pulp mill compliance.

Temporary resolution of conflict was achieved but at a price of increases in both conflict and public apathy. The coalition had to up the stakes by increasing the perceived conflict to mobilize people to action again. This time, though, many asked themselves, "What's the use?" In these situations, some fight harder and others give up. Neither strategy builds the future we want.

Here is another example of short-term compromise to reduce conflict. The official community plan of Ganges on Saltspring Island calls the town a "compact, pedestrian-oriented community." But the town is often clogged with vehicles, and people claim there is nowhere to park. So planners try to solve "the parking problem." However, if they make it easier to park, they make it easier to drive to town—increasing the number of cars and, in the long run, making the parking problem worse. In the process, Ganges ceases to be a pedestrian village. Short-term changes to reduce or get rid of conflict can actually prevent the real and lasting change we want.

Periodically, governments try to see what people think about what's happening. But these studies focus too often on concerns: fears, frustrations, and things we don't like and don't want. The focus is on problems and solutions. But what will

all these unconnected solutions add up to? What will the future they produce look like? The truth is we don't know. It's as though we are backing our way into the future, focused on things we don't want, on problems we want to get away from.

This is no way to create a future. At best it leads to compromise and mediocrity. At worst it will destroy what makes this province beautiful, unique and livable. Merely solving problems will not bring us what we want.

The Limits of Problem Solving

The problem with problem solving is that it is driven by a desire to stop or get rid of what we don't like and don't want—by the intensity of the conflict surrounding the problem.

This is why we leave our taxes until the last minute or don't go to the dentist until our tooth aches. It is why we have protests and counterprotests. Problems have to be intense before we are moved to seek solutions. However, if our actions reduce the intensity of a problem, we are less motivated to take more action. It is easy for our attention to be diverted by more pressing problems elsewhere.

When the focus is on problems, this pattern of behavior occurs in individuals, organizations, communities and even societies. Here is how it looks structurally:

A PROBLEM
leads to
ACTION
leads to
LESS INTENSITY
leads to
LESS ACTION
leads to
THE PROBLEM REMAINING

Cars were seen as a solution to pollution. Alcoholism can start as a few drinks to solve stress. Aid to Ethiopia reduced food prices and put farmers out of business, further restricting food supplies. Short-term solutions become long-term problems. People become frustrated. They blame each other, or governments, or outsiders. But it is no one's fault.

Problem solving, because it is driven by intensity, tends to oscillate back and forth between action and inaction. That's why we have concern about local issues for a while, then apathy, then more concern and so on. The fault lies in the structure of problem solving and our reliance on it as our predominant way of producing results.

But problem solving is neither the only nor the best way to produce results. Systems thinker Draper L. Kauffman Jr. (1980) writes, "Reacting to problems means letting the system control us. Only by using foresight do we have a real chance to control the system. Or, those who do not try to create the future they want must endure the future they get."

Rather than back our way into the future focused on solving problems and settling for whatever we get, we would do better to shift our focus to the process that has resulted in most of the major advances in human history: the creative process. This process has the power to transcend the conflict and confusion of difficult circumstances and to help us create the future we want.

Creating the Future We Most Want

Creating is driven by vision, rooted in reality and focused on

results. Creating neither solves nor ignores problems and circumstances. Rather, it transcends them in favor of clearly envisioned, tangible outcomes. You still have problems in a creative orientation, but they are no longer the driving force behind your actions. Vision is.

If we are to consciously create the future we most want, we must fashion a vision of how we want our province and our communities to be 20, 50 and 100 years from now. We also need to ground that vision in a clear, objective, accurate assessment of current reality. Doing so will set up a creative dynamic—an organizing framework for action—that leads to real and lasting results. Within that framework, we can learn what we need to know and do to move consistently toward realizing our vision and the future we most want.

Developing Vision

Shared vision arises from personal vision. Processes that attempt to fashion a communitywide or provincewide vision of the future without first helping individuals fashion personal visions for their communities often result in nothing more than nice-sounding sentiments and vague, forgettable mission statements.

Most people are much clearer about what they don't want than what they do want. Thus, they tend to slip into problem solving. However, when individuals learn to clarify personal visions for the future, it is much easier for all to rally around a clear and common vision for their community that they can share and make into a reality.

To fashion a personal vision, start with what you have, then imagine the future you would most like to have.

It's okay to start with a general sense of what you'd like, but you must turn that into a clear, focused picture of the result. Ask yourself questions such as these:

- What really matters to me? What do I most care about?
- What kind of community do I truly want to live in? What would living in it feel like?
- What do I most want the community to look and feel like—10, 20 and 100 years from now?
- What do I truly want the environment to look like? The economy? The government? The transportation system? The towns and villages? The social and educational systems? The arts, leisure and cultural amenities?
- What kind of community do I most want to give to my children and grandchildren?

Do not limit yourself to what you think is possible or realistic. For now, imagine that whatever you want is possible and focus on what you most want. This is not wishful thinking. It's simply asserting what you truly want. Concepts, such as "a healthy community," are fine at first, but you must gradually focus concepts into a clear, compelling vision—one you could recognize if you created it.

Focus sets limits and generates power. You focus by specifying. For example, the concept "a healthy transportation system" can be crystalized into "solar-powered buses on the main roads with mini-buses connecting with them from outlying areas; an extensive network of bicycle paths large enough to accommodate bikes with trailers and small electric-powered carts; and an extensive network of walking paths throughout the community."

The first statement is so general that it is meaningless. Anyone could agree with it, yet it could mean very different things to different people. People buy into such concepts only to be disappointed or angered by the results. The second statement is clear, specific and focused. The result would be easy to recognize. Agreement on such a clear, specific vision is harder to generate but leads to real and lasting results when achieved.

Guidelines for Crafting a Powerful Vision

There is no one way to envision the future, but these guidelines can help you get started. To establish a clear, powerful vision you must do the following:

Separate What You Want from What You Believe Is Possible

Do not limit your vision to what you think is possible or realistic. The creative process has a place for realism, but it is not in creating a vision. A vision is a statement of what you truly want—whether or not it is realistic or possible.

Artists, inventors, scientists and athletes all work toward visions without knowing if they are possible. Neither Van Gogh nor the Wright brothers knew if what they wanted was possible. They just knew they wanted it more than anything. Creators do set realistic steps for themselves, but the vision itself need not be realistic. A vision has more power if it is truly visionary. Go for what truly matters!

Focus on the Result, Not the Process

Don't worry about *how*—about the process by which you will achieve your vision—until you have clearly

specified what you want. Don't worry, at first, about the cost, the politics, the problems or the resources. Having a vision of something you don't yet know how to create is fine. Creating is a learning process. You'll learn what you need as you act—as you experiment, innovate and produce results. That's the nature of creating: you invent the process as well as the result. The key to successful creating is focusing on the result.

Include Everything You Want

Make sure your vision includes everything you want. If you want a healthy environment *and* a healthy economy, include both in your vision. If you want privacy *and* community, include both. If you want a logging industry *and* protected wilderness, include both.

Failure to include all of what you want can lead to oscillation and inaction. For example, a woman wanted a recycling system for her home office, but she couldn't get around to putting it in place. When asked, "Would you take it if you got it?" she answered, "Only if it's easy to use." So she revised her vision to specify "a simple, effective and easy-to-use recycling system." She had it in place within the month.

To be effective as a driving force, vision must be clearly specified. It must be formed independent of current circumstances, possibilities and processes. It should include everything you want. When individuals clearly specify personal visions, they are better able to join with others to create mutual visions. When people agree on a common, compelling vision and are willing to work together, that vision can do remarkable things. A clear, shared vision can

- convert reaction to creative action,
- convert fatalism and apathy to hope,
- promote collaboration over competition and
- encourage a whole systems rather than a piecemeal problem-solving approach to change.

But vision alone is not enough.

Vision not rooted in reality can become wishful thinking. To have power, vision must be embedded in a creative dynamic, a framework for action that includes both vision and reality. To set up such a framework, you must be clear about current reality and capable of holding vision and reality in mind simultaneously.

Clarifying Current Reality

Current reality includes a clear, accurate and objective description of where you are now in relation to your vision, in relation to the result you want to create.

Knowing where you're starting from is critical. It gives you a firm foundation from which to take action and move toward your vision. To establish current reality, observe your circumstances objectively and accurately. Tell yourself the truth about what you are doing and what is happening, including what you say to yourself or others about both. If you don't know where you're starting from, it can be difficult to get to where you want to go.

For example, mothers re-entering the work force often tell themselves and others that they have no skills. Actually, they have high levels of generic skills such as negotiating, decision making and resource allocation that they can transfer to other aspects of life and work. By telling themselves that they have no skills, they distort current reality and

hinder their capacity to act in support of their vision.

Small towns and rural communities do something similar when they tell themselves that they do not have the same skills city-based experts have. Often, they have not only those skills but also a greater understanding of local reality. Communities that carefully assess their current reality usually do better than those that don't.

To assess current reality, ask yourself questions such as these:

- What do I currently have in relation to the result I want? Where am I now?
- What is really happening? Which forces in play support my vision? Which do not?
- What am I telling myself and others about current reality? Am I telling the truth? Or am I exaggerating, distorting or generalizing?
- What don't I know about the current situation?
- What aspects of my vision are already in place? What gaps exist?
- What resources, strengths, contacts and supports do I have? What weaknesses and limitations?

Describe, Don't Judge

Simply describe those aspects of current reality relevant to your vision—without exaggerating, deleting or distorting; don't make current reality better or worse than it is. Refrain from judging, generalizing or editorializing.

For example, the statement "The hole in the ozone has increased by 15 percent over the last 12 months" describes current reality. "We have only 10 years to solve the ozone problem or the damage will be irreparable" judges. "The company

has exceeded the allowable cut by 17 percent each year for the last three” describes. “The company is trying to destroy our watershed” judges.

The last statement does not describe what is actually happening. Rather, it predicts. Such statements are often made up to shock or frighten—to compel—people into action by increasing the intensity of an issue. But this kind of tactic often backfires. Rather than mobilize us to act, it can lead to despair, hopelessness and inaction.

Judgments such as these help vent indignation and anger or bolster shaky positions, but they are far from objective and accurate descriptions of current reality. Nor do statements such as “It’s impossible to make any changes” or “There is nothing I can do” accurately describe current reality. They, too, are judgments, based on generalizations. In reality, there may be nothing you can do—yet. In time, who knows?

This is not nitpicking semantics. Language maps reality. If your language is inaccurate, so is your map. You are not likely to end up where you want to be if you use a faulty map.

Never Say Never

When assessing current reality, make sure your descriptions do not contain absolute words such as *never, always, totally, completely* and *impossible* or exaggerations such as *destroyed, devastated* and *disaster*. Take care to avoid such words or to qualify them in phrases such as *sometimes, almost always* and *mostly*. Remember, don’t judge—describe! Distorting current reality, deliberately or accidentally, is almost always self-defeating.

Finally, it is important to look at current reality continuously. Reality changes. Don’t assume it has remained the same as it was the last time you looked. Keep your observations of reality up to date. Current reality means current!

Next, we’ll examine how current reality, when held with a clear, compelling vision, can set up a dynamic framework for creating results you truly want.

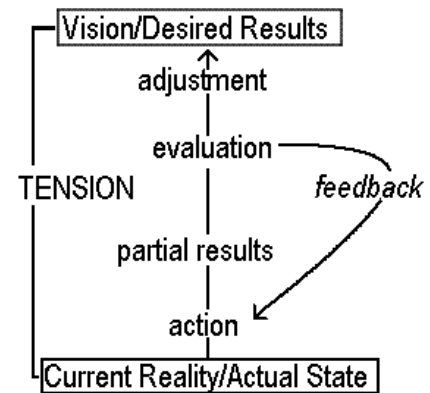
A Framework for Creating Results You Truly Want

Vision and current reality are necessary components of creating. However, to actually create the results you truly want, both vision and reality must be contained in a dynamic framework for organizing day-to-day actions around what truly matters. Holding vision and current reality simultaneously forms a dynamic structure in which your day-to-day actions are more likely to lead to your desired results. Unlike the structure of problem solving, which tends to oscillate, the structure of creating guides action toward lasting, final results.

The Creative Dynamic

Once you have established a clear vision and an accurate, objective view of reality, you must keep them both in your mind at the same time. Holding vision and current reality simultaneously sets up a creative dynamic, an energized, interactive structure with a natural tendency—a path of least resistance—to move toward final results.

The Creative Dynamic



When your vision of the future differs from the current reality, there is a discrepancy—a gap—between where you are and where you want to be. This discrepancy sets up a tension that seeks resolution. This tension is structural, not emotional or psychological.

Structural tension is like being in love with the result you want. You find that result beautiful, exciting and desirable; you feel strongly attracted to it. Being in love tends to organize your actions so that you move toward who or what you desire. Structural tension does the same.

Tension in any system seeks resolution and generates energy that moves along the path of least resistance. A stretched rubber band is highly energized, and its natural tendency—its path of least resistance—is to return to its original state. A rubber band’s energy can power a model airplane or keep a lid on a cake box. Structural tension within a creative dynamic also generates energy that moves along a path of least resistance. By guiding the resolution of tension in a system, you can use its energy to take action to achieve the results you truly want—independent of current circumstances.

Structural tension is not a magic force. This tension can resolve in favor of either vision or current reality. It depends on how you orchestrate the resolution of the tension. If you lower or change your vision, the tension resolves in favor of current reality. Things stay the same; the tendency is to seek relief from problems. However, when you hold vision firm and describe reality objectively, the natural tendency in the structure—the path of least resistance—is for action to change reality in the direction of vision.

In the creative dynamic formed by a clear vision and an accurate assessment of current reality, you do not need an elaborate plan or predetermined path. You need to know only your next few steps. Any action taken in this structure tends to move toward the desired result—even the setbacks and mistakes. You learn what you need to know and do along the way by acting, noting results, correcting mistakes, building momentum and taking more action. Step by step, inch by inch, you get closer to the results you want.

The creative dynamic works more like sailing than taking a train. On a train trip, you know in advance not only where you will start and end but also all the stops in between. In sailing, all you know in advance is where you're starting from and where you want to end up. Your route will be greatly affected by the forces in play (for example, tides, currents, storms and shipping routes). You make up your path as you go!

Sailors are more flexible and better able to deal with difficult or changing circumstances than are train takers. When sailors get blown off course, they simply get out their

sextants or tune in the loran, and determine their new position. Then they set their compass heading for a new course in the direction of their destination. Compare this to what happens when a train goes off the track!

Sailors work with the forces and circumstances they encounter within a structural framework that includes a desired destination (vision) and a carefully plotted daily position (current reality). They make up their routes as they go, in harmony with the forces in play. We can do the same throughout our province and within our communities. We can make up the future we most want.

Structural tension is the core of the creative dynamic, the engine of creativity. Without it, your action will revert to problem solving and its oscillating structure. Within the creative dynamic, you considerably increase your chances of consistently producing real and lasting change and the results you truly want.

Choice and Action in Creating

Choice is critical in the creative process. Choosing activates the creative dynamic and sets the process of creating in motion. Choosing is fundamentally different from wanting, wishing, hoping or demanding.

Take a moment and think of something you want. Say to yourself, "I wish I had it. I hope I get it." Where is the power in those statements? Within you or external to you? Now say to yourself, "I choose to have it." Where is the power in that statement? Which has more power, "I wish" or "I choose"? Choosing is a deliberate step toward what you want. It sets the direction for your future.

Creators know that some choices are more important than others. They set up a structural framework—a hierarchy—in which some choices are primary and others secondary.

Primary choices are about the result, something you want for its own sake. For an artist, a painting is usually a primary choice, not merely a step toward career success. Either a gold medal or a healthy body may be an athlete's primary choice. Clean air, clean water, or an ecologically and economically sustainable community may be primary choices. Some choices are both primary and secondary. For example, a clean, sparkling lake might be both something you want for its own sake and a step toward the larger vision of a clean, healthy watershed. A vision does not become primary until you designate it so, until you choose it.

Secondary choices are steps you take to bring primary choices into being. A painter experiments with color tones to capture the subtlety of her vision. An athlete gets up at 5 a.m. to train because it supports his vision of a gold medal. You buy unbleached paper, grow organic vegetables and recycle as steps toward a sustainable life and community.

In the creative process, secondary choices always support primary choices. If you are clear about and committed to your primary choices, making strategic secondary choices is easy. You make such choices not because you have to but because they support what you truly want. Creating a hierarchy of choices ensures that secondary choices are not seen as sacrifices. For example, buying unbleached paper, eating less meat and caring for an organic

garden all come to be seen not as burdens but as things you want to do to support your primary choice of an ecological community and a healthy Earth.

Merely listing all the things you want or your principles and values is not useful if some of these are more important than others. You need to be clear with yourself and others about which choices are primary and which are secondary. For example, if you want both jobs and a healthy environment, you must determine which one is your primary choice. If jobs are primary, you will make environmental decisions that support jobs. If the environment is primary, you'll create jobs that support a healthy environment. A major failing of community plans and other policy statements is that they rarely distinguish between primary and secondary choices.

Power in Diversity

If we—first individually, then collectively—set up a framework for action, a creative dynamic based on vision and current reality, we can transcend the limitations and flaws of the problem-solving approach. We can cocreate the future we most want. Within such a framework, almost any action we take will tend to move toward desired results.

But cocreating the future we most want does not mean we must all do the same things. Indeed, the strength of this approach is that we can each do different things and still arrive at the same result. A creative dynamic contains room for differences.

Many positions are taken relative to our province's and our communities' future. But positions

are only starting points in a creative orientation. There is no one best place to start. Start wherever you are, by clarifying your own vision, your own current reality. Set up a creative dynamic and take action. Experiment. Try things out. Note your results and make adjustments. As you do, you will build momentum, produce results and gradually shape the result you most want.

There is also no one right way to get to where you—and we—want to go. If we can reach a consensus about our destination (vision) and our starting point (current reality), there is room for difference in how we get there.

Creating is not based on static, linear, "I'm right, you're wrong" thinking. Creating is equifinal—we can reach the same final state or goal from different initial conditions or in different ways. We shouldn't get hung up on the rightness of our positions or pet processes. Rather, we should see them as one of many small waves of gentle action that, only in combination with other, different waves, will lead to large effects, to the results we all truly want.

We all have different reasons for living in this wonder-filled province, and we each do things differently. This diversity is one of our strengths. But underneath our surface differences lie deep and common longings.

We want clean air and water. We want healthy food and a safe environment for our children. We want meaningful, satisfying work. We want community and sharing. We want individuality and independence. We want freedom. We want to be true to ourselves. We want good health. These things

are what we truly want. These longings matter most. They are the best basis on which to build a future together. From these common longings, rather than from specific positions and processes, we can best fashion a shared vision of the future we most want.

To fashion that vision, we need ways to talk to each other about what really matters. Forums and public meetings are a start, but we need more informal approaches like salons and potluck get-togethers in each other's homes. We need informal local roundtables and afternoon coffee klatches—groups open to anyone, regardless of his or her opinion, that meet regularly in local restaurants, pubs or libraries to seek win-win ways of creating results that matter. In Anchorage, Alaska, the Wednesday Roundtable has been meeting for two years, and its members have learned to interact around decision making using influence rather than power, and collaboration rather than fighting.

We also need to increase our skills in decision making, thinking, speaking clearly and listening carefully. Perhaps informal study circles focused on specific skills would help. Study circles, a form of popular education developed in Scandinavia, involve small groups of people getting together informally to discuss topics of mutual interest. The aim is not to reach consensus or establish rightness but, rather, to explore ideas, assumptions and values in a cooperative search for genuine understanding.

Above all, we need to learn how to create—how to master and apply the creative process to what really

matters to us. We need to hone our vision-building skills. We need to practise observing current reality accurately and objectively. We need to learn how to set up and maintain structural tension. We need to know how to make good choices and decisions. We need to know how to take action and evaluate the results. Without these skills, we will find it difficult to do more than react or respond to never-ending waves of problems and conflict. With them, we can create the future we want.

Conclusion

By learning and mastering the skills and form of the creative process, we can give voice to the deep longings and mutually desired long-term results we all care about. By bringing them into the light of

day, sharing them with each other and noting our common desires, we can begin to cocreate a shared vision of a future we can all agree on and champion.

In the light of such a mutual vision, we can objectively assess our collective current reality. Within the creative dynamic set up by holding in mind both vision and reality, we can take action to create our individual futures and satisfy our own needs and to cocreate a common future, joyfully and harmoniously, in a way that truly satisfies us all.

We have a wonderful opportunity to create the future we most want, and the natural and human resources to make it a reality. It's time to focus less on problems and more on results. It's time to shift from letting conflict drive our actions to acting in support of a shared vision.

It is time for us to stop fighting each other and to join together, differences and all, to cocreate the future we most want, to make this wonderful province and its many communities places worth living in and taking a stand for. If not us, who? If not now, when?

Reference

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