



a new twist on

THE OLD TALKING STICK

Queen's Executive Decision Centre celebrates 20 years of computer-based meeting support

BY CHRISTINE WARD

Last November, Erik Lockhart, the Associate Director of Queen's Executive Decision Centre, stood alongside 4,000 people facing a monumental task: how to rebuild New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina. After deciding on a game plan with his fellow facilitators, he got down to work. Laptop poised, he sat down at the nearest table of 15 current and former New Orleans residents and dove right in to the hot-button issues – education, crime and policing, health care, neighbourhoods, and resettlement.

No issue was too contentious. No idea too extreme.

Erik was in facilitator heaven.

"Creating the Unified New Orleans Plan," as the super-sized strategy session was called, was Erik's largest team decision-making meeting by far. It was also the first time he had worked with multiple facilitators. The 10-site, coast-to-coast meeting included a cast of more than 100 facilitators who shared his group dynamics

skills and passion for computer-based meeting support.

This wasn't the only time the Centre's facilitators and technology have been parachuted in to lend their expertise and focus to difficult and sometimes contentious community and corporate issues.

THE FIRST OF ITS KIND IN CANADA

Founded in 1987 by Dr. Brent Gallupe, Queen's Executive Decision Centre is Canada's first electronic group-decision support laboratory. Over 20 years, Brent (now the Centre's Director) and Erik, together with associate facilitator George Jackson, have helped more than 400 different organizations tackle everything from strategic planning to new product development and employee satisfaction. The team delivers a technology-inspired twist on traditional meetings and decision models that puts the venerable "talking stick" – once used by Native North Americans to denote the 'right to

speak' at council meetings – into the hands of everyone around the table. What makes the Centre's approach so novel is not only does it give every participant a voice, it enables them to provide their feedback anonymously if they desire. Feedback provided via networked laptops allows all to 'speak' at one time, with no one participant monopolizing the discussion.

"Seventy per cent or more of an executive's time is spent in meetings that, although important, are often less than productive," says Erik. "Time is wasted, poor decisions are made or, worse, no decisions are made at all. People fail to engage, then they don't follow through on their accountabilities.

"We know it to be true from our own experiences, from published research on group dynamics and we heard it first-hand from those attending Queen's executive programs – organizational meetings and team decision-making were, quite simply, not working."

Helping New Orleans recover after Hurricane Katrina

is a career highlight for the Centre's Erik Lockhart.



Erik Lockhart facilitates an Executive Decision Centre session.

In 1985, Brent set out to uncover a solution as part of his PhD thesis, specializing in workplace productivity and decision-making. He quickly zeroed in on computer technology and networks, which were rapidly emerging as a cost- and time-saving tool and means of communication for people in organizations.

"Until that point," says Brent, "very little research had been done assessing computer support of people working in groups or teams, either face-to-face or remotely."

With Brent in the lead and with the support of John Gordon, Dean of the School of Business from 1978 to 1988, computer hardware and networking for teams were tested, and – working with a research team in Arizona – a prototype software package called Group Decision Support Software (GDSS) was developed and eventually commercialized.

Two years later, the Executive Decision Centre was born.

A SOLID PLAN OF ACTION

In 2006, as the newly appointed President and CEO of Toronto-based Technical Standards and Safety Authority (TSSA), Kathy Milsom knew she had an early opportunity to engage her employees and make them feel their ideas counted.

She turned to Queen's Executive Decision Centre for help and watched as Erik asked a group of representative employees to identify the organization's greatest challenges and possible solutions. Around the room, employees started typing on their



Executives spend 70% of their time in meetings that can be **real time-wasters.**



networked laptops while their ideas simultaneously appeared on a big screen, as if by magic. Immediately, Erik went to work sorting, merging and identifying themes. After some discussion, the employees were back at their keyboards voting on the top ideas and then creating action plans for each idea, all with the full support of TSSA's senior management.

The impressive results led Kathy to book a follow-up session immediately.

"It was an important message to the employees about the culture of our organization," she says in retrospect. "Everyone feels much more comfortable expressing their views knowing that their ideas and opinions are valued."

There are other, more tangible results. During a recent two-day strategic planning session with TSSA's senior management team, Erik helped identify a number of top priorities critical to the company's growth agenda. A day later, the company had a solid plan with timelines, champions and a clear commitment to action.

"Those kinds of results would have taken days and days with a conventional method," concludes Kathy.

"Everyone feels much more comfortable expressing their views knowing that their ideas and opinions are valued,"

says client Kathy Milsom.

SLOW AND STEADY

But the road leading to such success wasn't always so smooth. The development of the Group Decision Support Software in the mid-1980s involved extensive testing by the Arizona research team, the School of Business and several other North American partners. Over its first five to six years using the technology, the Executive Decision Centre focused on providing decision-making support for the School's Executive Development programs and feeding the results back to the researchers for upgrades. By the time Erik joined the team in 1993, the GDSS pilot study was showing enough promise to justify casting a wider net.

"I invited in a handful of campus groups, along with the United Way, Big Sisters, the Red Cross and some teachers," remembers Erik. "They worked together

to uncover several important issues affecting the local community and came up with some innovative solutions, all while having a ball with the technology. Best of all was the participation of several people who said they were too shy to speak out at group meetings. They found the anonymity of the process liberating, and some of their ideas really helped spark the discussions."

By early 1997, the resources were in place for the Centre to purchase the software and officially open the doors to external client groups. For the first time, Erik and Brent had the capacity to take their show on the road, providing computer-based meeting support directly, using client offices and meeting rooms across North America.

The results were nothing short of remarkable.

The Centre's services **make meetings more productive, efficient and even enjoyable for participants.**

RESULTS WORTH MEASURING

The Executive Decision Centre grew from 20 clients in the first year to 40 in Year Two. By 2007 – 20 years after the Centre’s founding and a decade after going “public” – they had completed more than 900 sessions with 400 different organizations (see sidebar for a sample). Among a long list of benefits, clients frequently report an increased ability to efficiently analyze issues, solve complex problems, resolve conflicts and arrive at high-quality solutions faster and more effectively than through traditional meetings.

Because of the involvement of employees at all levels of accountability, the Centre’s methods are also credited with empowering staff and ensuring a greater commitment to ongoing implementation.

The measurable outcomes don’t end there. At DuPont’s US operations in Wilmington, Delaware, for example, a one-day business development session using GDSS resulted in six new business plans, two of which have since been launched commercially.

The Centre’s success isn’t just about the software, cautions Brent. “Ninety per cent of the job is delivering solid group dynamics skills. The research shows us that if we put nothing but technology in front of people, chaos will ensue.”

The fact that Queen’s sessions are led by experienced facilitators is what truly distinguishes the Executive Decision Centre from the half a dozen or so other organizations in Canada – among them, IBM, Royal Bank, CIBC, University of Calgary and the British Columbia Institute of Technology – with electronic meeting facilities.

MORE THAN JUST SOFTWARE

Listening, synthesizing, summarizing, introducing alternative perspectives, seeing the big picture, harnessing emotion, and knowing when to intervene and when to observe – these are the recognized marks of an excellent facilitator. According to two recent clients, Queen’s Executive Decision Centre delivers the complete package.

“Technology is the medium,” says Stephen Chait, Director of Economic Development for the Town of Markham, which first retained the Centre 18 months ago to help develop the town’s 10-year economic development strategy. In a town hall meeting with 120 community stakeholders, Erik guided the group through more than 150 ideas to pinpoint six concrete ways of improving Markham’s future prosperity.

“The real benefit was in how well Erik made use of the technology,” says Stephen.

Kathy Milsom agrees. “As a facilitator, Erik is incredibly effective at ensuring we stay on track, that our voices are heard and that at the end of the day we have an achievable plan.”

A LIFETIME PURSUIT

A former management consultant in the Vancouver office of Andersen Consulting, Erik’s introduction to the Executive Decision Centre came during the final year of his Queen’s MBA when he worked as a research associate to Brent Gallupe. Fourteen years and more than 650 sessions later, he still calls himself a “rookie.”

Today, Erik spends most of his time on the road meeting with clients. On campus, he can often be found leading case study

discussions and classes on consensus-building. The Centre is also the site of ongoing research and analysis to track trends in team decision-making.

“This really is a lifetime pursuit,” Erik laughs.

In the 20 years since its founding, Queen’s Executive Decision Centre has helped more than 400 organizations. Counted among the Centre’s recent clients are:

Canada’s 50 Best Managed Companies
DuPont
Technical Standards and Safety Authority
Town of Markham
Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre
City of Calgary
Canadian National Exhibition
McMaster University
Ontario Tourism Association
City of New Orleans, Louisiana

As for what lies ahead, Erik has a few ideas that took root last November during the emotional hours spent priority-setting in New Orleans. “I have a vision of a large-scale brainstorming session in Canada around the issue of health care or the environment. If we could harness our passion, I think it could lead to breakthrough solutions.”

If the past 20 years are any indication, Queen’s Executive Decision Centre could help to make it happen.

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“CANADA’S LEADER IN ELECTRONIC MEETING FACILITATION”

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