

Groundhog Day Interrupted

Karen McLeod



An essay contribution to
Conversation 2015

Participant Bio



Karen McLeod

President/CEO, Benchmarks

Karen McLeod has served as the President/CEO for Benchmarks since June 2006. In this role, she provides strategic direction and leadership in the representation of approximately 95 private service agencies that provide mental health, social service, substance abuse and juvenile justice programs to children across North Carolina. She engages legislative and state/federal agencies to secure funding and laws to promote quality care and best practice to drive system improvements. Mrs. McLeod has led the work of the association to focus on system changes to improve outcomes of care that emphasize researched based intervention models, effective use of data to track outcomes and performance based contracting.

Prior to this position, Mrs. McLeod was the Executive Director of the North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Service, a non-profit association that represents the 100 county DSS agencies. She also served as Director of the Office of Victim Services for the NC Department of Correction. Karen has also worked in the field of mediation, hospice and provided family intervention services for high-risk children.

She is married and is the proud mother of a beautiful 8 year old daughter named Logan!



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One of my favorite movies is “Groundhog Day,” released in 1993 with Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. Bill plays the character Phil Connors, an arrogant TV weatherman, who goes on an unwanted assignment to cover the annual Groundhog Day event in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. He gets caught in a time loop and finds himself experiencing the same day over and over again.

Besides appreciating Bill Murray’s comic genius, I was fascinated by the concept of experiencing the same day again and again until your moral compass, motivation, and character align to create a perfect day. I have decided (probably much to the Hubble brothers’ chagrin!) that this is the essence of *GHC Conversations*. It is a place to make us step outside of the daily emails, meetings, conference calls, carpool, etc., so we can look inward to determine what is out of alignment and creating a “groundhog day” effect in which we keep repeating the same patterns of thinking and behaving that prevents us from achieving right being/wise actions.

Often times, there is great difficulty in recognizing the behaviors that contribute to the “Groundhog Day Effect” (GDE), as they become so integrated into our being that it is like background noise you no longer hear. For me, that background noise was a competitive “dog-eat-dog, don’t take prisoners, giving in is weak”, messages I had subconsciously internalized through daily lessons learned from school, work, media, peers and generally from our society. These messages developed into behaviors, concepts, and reactions to challenges or signs of weakness that slowly skewed my motivations and perceptions of success. One of the trickiest parts to recognizing my GDE was an additional mask of driving a righteous cause in representing the oppressed, poor and frail. It is much easier to justify a “winner takes all” approach to your work when you have righteous indignation on your side!

Before you visually place horns and a tail on me, I would note that most of my misplaced GDE resulted in community good for the people I represented such as: increased reimbursement for foster parents and additional funding for quality mental health treatment for foster children, rights and protection for incapacitated elderly wards of the state, funding for perinatal services in high infant death rate areas, restorative justice for victims of crime, etc. However, it did leave its mark on many individuals and agencies that “got in the way” to making my organization’s work successful.

I know wonder how much more widespread and lasting the impact of our success could have been, if pursued with a right being/wise action in community approach. In retrospect, I realize a myriad of lost opportunities that I once viewed as “competition” interfering with my goal.

In my experience, many non-profit leaders share a similar perspective of seeing other community agencies as competition. It may be the result of the resource limited environment we work in, the expectation from granters for short-term results, or the emphasis on money only for the delivery of service and not for the infrastructure to support it. This atmosphere lends itself to a scrappy, law-of-the-jungle mentality that is pervasive in non-profits and attracts executives with a survival of the fittest approach.

So how do we change this environment and move the work toward a greater collective good rather than an individual organization “win” with so many forces stacked against it? That is the Hubble question...

Fourteen, of the last twenty-four years of my work history, have been spent in non-profits. I have seen, and been part of, many community collaborative efforts across agencies but have seen very few long-standing and/or extensive partnerships. Disruptions to the partnerships resulted from leadership changes, financial pressures, lack of structure to sustain the collaboration efforts, waning interest in the partnership work, and conflict that arose in the shared vision.

About two years ago, I was asked to participate in an unprecedented collaborative effort. North Carolina for many years had been experiencing tremendous conflict between the providers (who I represent) of mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse services (MH/DD/SA) and the managed care organizations (MCOs) that manage the capitated funds for the system. The conflict was evident by our vicious fighting at the legislature and attempts to undermine each other with state government leaders. A great deal of time and energy was being invested in our attempts to “win” rather than focusing our energy on the collective good of the people we serve.

Tentative efforts were made to develop a partnership between our two groups by establishing a MCO/Provider Steering Committee. I was asked to chair this unlikely group of partners and our first few meetings were tenuous, at best. Prior to each meeting, I would prepare by acknowledging my adverse GDE behaviors and commit to disrupting those old patterns. I went into the committee meetings with a focus on achieving right-being by leaving old conflicts at the door, keeping a humble heart, being authentic and transparent in my interactions, and trusting in this process to move wise action. In the beginning, this change created a sense of vulnerability which over time was replaced with a sense of affirmation as I witnessed a transformation within the group. Over twelve to eighteen

months, the dynamics shifted and paranoia began to be replaced with curiosity, anger was recycled into problem solving, and suspicion slowly morphed into trust. This was hardly a smooth process but an astonishing transition from our historical relationship based on conflict, open hostility and mistrust.

My efforts to move the steering committee work forward were strengthened from lessons learned at the 2014 GHC meeting where I was introduced to the work of John Kania and Mark Kramer in *Engaging Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity*. Their framework identifies 5 key conditions to shared success.

1. Common Agenda
2. Shared Measurements
3. Mutually Reinforcing Activities
4. Continuous Communications
5. Backbone Support

Upon my return from the GHC meeting, I began to create an organizational structure for our steering committee based on these principles. This framework provided a foundation and infrastructure to enhance, strengthen, and sustain the partnership. However, there was a gap in the “Backbone Support” because I was providing the heavy lifting for the group while managing my own position along with chairing several other statewide coalitions. My limited time did not provide the amount of support needed for the group.

In an effort to expand the boundaries and trust of the group, and to provide the needed administrative structure, I suggested that the providers and MCOs hire a shared position which we would jointly fund and supervise. It took several meetings and a lot of discussion to adjust the participants’ schema to this foreign concept, but we eventually achieved 100% support. As of January 2015, we officially hired the shared staff person!

In a two year time period, we had transitioned away from hiring lobbyists and attorneys to attack the other group, to establishing a joint steering committee with three highly active subcommittees, a shared legislative agenda, a shared practice position with state administrators and a shared staff employee. By diverting our energies toward solutions rather than conflict, conversations within the committee started shifting from solving business practice problems to improving service delivery and outcomes for the people we serve.

Bringing a right-being mindset to the steering committee has been one of the greatest learning, frustrating, humbling, and joyful experiences of my career. It has opened a new way of approaching my work, unfettered by the need to “control or win” the process, but to authentically participate in concerted action with others towards a common goal.

It is incredibly easy to slip back into old habits and this new approach requires daily attention and maintenance. My commitment is to remain authentic and intentional in the small role that I play. My hope is that by keeping my heart open to disparate voices, honoring the dignity of those around me and remaining grateful for the journey, that I can be part of the catalyst driving wise action in social change for my community.

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