

GENERAL SEMANTICS AND NEIGHBORHOOD REINVESTMENT*

by

William Whiteside

Before I address the subject of general semantics as it relates to the work of The Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, I believe it is necessary to give you some of my personal history and the history of the organization. First, Neighborhood Reinvestment, 1980.

The Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation is a nonprofit public corporation with direct Congressional funding. Our Board of Directors is made up of:

Chairman
Federal Home Loan Bank Board

Chairman
National Credit Union Administration

Secretary
US Department of Housing and Urban Development

Comptroller of the Currency

Member, Board of Governors Federal Reserve System

Chairman
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

Neighborhood Reinvestment acts as a catalyst, stimulating the creation and development of public-private-resident partnerships. Through these partnerships, neighborhoods in need of assistance are being revitalized and people's lives improved. The major vehicle is called Neighborhood Housing Services -- housing rehabilitation on the neighborhood scale.

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Neighborhood reinvestment had its beginning in the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in the early 70's. The Bank Board, for those of you unfamiliar with the agency, is the Federal regulator of savings and loans associations. At that time the Chairman of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, Preston Martin, was urging the industry to work and loan more in the cities. He recognized, however, that regulations alone could not do the job. If he was to be successful in redirecting the focus of the industry from the suburbs to the central cities, he had to find a way to deal with the attitudes and preconceived ideas of the people involved.

At that time, I was the director of the Coro Foundation, an organization founded in 1942 by a group of concerned individuals in San Francisco who were involved in public life. This group had as its agenda the development of a program that would give future public affairs leaders the tools of general semantics to sharpen their ability to make decisions based on a broad framework of questioning and observations.

I was an intern with Coro in 1953 and a staff member in 1954 and served in that role until I joined the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in 1970. The Coro program used general semantics as its base and J. Samuel Bois, author of The Art of Awareness, participated in our Los Angeles program. Coro staff became familiar with Science and Sanity and used the general semantics tools provided in both program design and program approach. Each year we would select twelve individuals (interns) who would spend the year in Los Angeles, and twelve additional interns in San Francisco. (The program is now also established in St. Louis).

The Coro program was designed to have the participants test their assumptions about public life and public leadership. It gave the participants the opportunity to develop the thinking and analytical skills needed to sort out complex issues in public life. All of the educational tools we used in that program were experientially based. Interns were assigned to a variety of institutions with an individual at the policy making level such as the Chief Executive Officer. Each intern was placed in a labor union, a corporation, a government agency, as well as with a political candidate, and in the media, for several weeks.

Each of the individual interns returned to the office to meet with the group once a week. They shared their differing perceptions of public problems, interviewed individuals of influence, and became adept at questioning, probing, observing and understanding the role of language in behavior.

Gradually, the twelve individuals became a 'group'. The group was based on respect for each other's differences and the synergism created by their shared new experiences.

All those associated with Coro during those years (as now) were learning new ways of educating to effect constructive change in the public arena -- not so much through compromise, as through creating new realities based on the general semantics principles of recognizing differences, understanding neurological behaviors related to language and finding common understandings and concerns in building relationships.

In 1970 I was hired first as a consultant and then as a staff member to implement a similar program. The original proposal had as its guts an experiential base and my approach was to use general semantics principles in the program design.

Unlike Coro, I did not have a group of young people who were intensely interested in careers in public service. Nor did I have the luxury of conducting a "General Semantics Week," which was a part of the Coro program. In effect, Coro was attempting to give their participants a total life's orientation using general semantics principles. Within the parameters and cultural environment of a federal financial regulatory agency this was not an approach that could be used successfully.

To give you a sense of this, I would like to share with you one of the comments of an early participant in one of the first workshops I conducted with the Federal Home Loan Bank System. At that time, I would invite a person skilled in general semantics to make a two or three hour presentation. The design simply was to have participants question their judgments and assumptions about both people and institutions. To be effective, we also used as heterogeneous a group as possible, including representatives from banks and savings and loans, community residents, and representatives from the local government of the city in which we were working. Participants in the program would spend two weeks with us. Most of the time was spent in meetings with public officials, housing activist groups, and perceived community leaders. These meetings and interviews would then be followed by discussion sessions. The content of the discussions many times led directly to the values based on the perceptions of each individual participant. Many times the values clashed and participants would sink to the 'blame game' level. However, in the process, they came to recognize that their values and preconceived ideas about 'those' people and 'the neighborhoods they lived in' were changed. And in the process, the individuals changed and many developed long-lasting relationships with the others that carry over today.

That was a long introduction to share a story, but I believe it will help you understand the change in environment from Coro to the Bank Board. It was one of the last sessions of the Course when a savings and loan executive turned to me in the middle of the discussion and said, "What right do you have to make me a better person!" I must say I don't remember my reply, but I have

never forgotten the question.

As a part of the program design, we created committees to work on a project of their own selection. The project was, of course, housing related and we met with the group weekly in follow-up meetings to keep the program on track.

We realized after the first program that we needed to develop an on-going mechanism if the programs were to have long range impact both on the attitudes and, of course, the final product, the improved quality of housing in the cities.

Initially called the Center for Executive Development, we only had three staff members to carefully craft these programs. Our initial vehicle, a "service corporation," changed to the Neighborhood Housing Services model when we discovered this on-going program in Pittsburgh. It had diversity and was quite successful.

We became the Urban Reinvestment Task Force in 1974, and received a \$12 million demonstration grant from HUD to continue developing NHS's. Foundations, such as Ford, were becoming interested in our ability to form strong partnerships of diverse people that made real changes -- including the generation of private capital in neighborhoods that were formerly deteriorating in value. Our approach has not changed. Although we now have local nonprofit housing programs operating in 96 cities and 112 neighborhoods, we still always begin the programs with a workshop which includes a general semantics orientation session designed to have the participants test their assumptions. We believe we are much more sophisticated at it and now have a much larger staff to carry out the tasks.

The task force has now become the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, and we are funded by Congress in much the same way the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is funded. Our focus remains a careful educational process to develop small, locally controlled programs which will improve the quality of housing and of life in neighborhoods. We have expanded from the NHS program to additional programs to meet local neighborhood needs, always based on the partnership concept.

In addition to using general semantics as a catalyst in our development, we concentrate on it much more directly in our staff training. We are currently in the process of setting up a school in which general semantics will play a major role. We use general semantics as our basic operating philosophy and attempt to give our staff the skills and tools outlined by Korzybski and Bois which lead to clear analytical thinking.

The Structural Differential is presented as a tool for meeting

and event analysis. The Semantic Transactor is used as a reminder of the ever-changing nature and varied backgrounds of our participants. It is also used to give our staff a conscious recognition that no matter who they are dealing with, or at what level, the people have basically the same needs. We use Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and his book Motivation and Personality to give the staff another handle on understanding themselves and the people with whom they are working.

The principle of non-identity -- "The map is not the territory," the principles of non-allness, indexing, self-reflexiveness and 'etc.', are a strategic part of our staff training and orientation.

Our staff is trained in the educational role of helping all program participants to accept each other as unique individuals. The self-interest of each (whether profit and safety of investments, quality of life in a neighborhood, or tax base) is fine. A new self-interest is discovered in maintaining the value of the homes. This creates a new synergism from which a new reality can be formed and produce change. Without using the words "general semantics," our staff shares the tools and ideas, and they are the core of each carefully crafted program.

Training our staff to be educators in the concepts of non-judgment and empathy is an on-going process. At our recent series of regional staff meetings various staff members made presentations on chapters from Bois on the Semantic Transactor model of man and the neurological aspects of our behavior. These presentations became the basis for small group discussions which focused on how these two specific functions tied into our work. The small groups then presented their findings to the entire group. This process is very similar to the process we follow in developing programs at the local level. In each case we see ourselves as educators in the truest sense of the word.

It might be well at this point to share our mission statement. It reads:

THE MISSION STATEMENT

OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD REINVESTMENT CORPORATION

1. Assist local communities to revitalize neighborhoods for the benefit of current residents.
2. Develop, through educational processes, working partnerships of residents, local government officials and financial institution representatives to accomplish neighborhood revitalization.

3. Discover, test and replicate neighborhood program models which promote reinvestment in neighborhoods; and which
 - (a) exert a long-term stabilizing influence on the neighborhood lending environment, and
 - (b) lead to a perceived improving quality of life which will strengthen weak demand factors in the neighborhood real estate market.
4. Provide on-going supportive services to local programs to ensure their continuing effectiveness.

This educational aspect is difficult for some people to understand. Our programs are designed to be locally controlled non-profit corporations. The financial institutions serve on the local Board of Directors with grass roots community residents. It takes us six months to a year, working through a series of workshops and a committee structure, to develop the program. The reason for this is simple. We only facilitate the meetings; our real role is to provide leadership and direction, to set up a committee structure, and have the group elect a chairperson. From that point on, the participants run the meetings themselves. Our staff is present to serve the committees and develop an educational framework for the local people to do it themselves.

This facilitation role requires a special quality in our staff and one that is hard to find. Basically, our staff must 'get their kicks' not from being the out front leader, but, like a true educator, from watching other people grow and develop in their new roles of public service. This, of course, goes back to the concept of self-reflexiveness and the necessary awareness of the staff to see the role they play in the process.

Our programs are effective only if the participants 'take over' and forget the role of Neighborhood Reinvestment. You may have seen the bumper sticker that reads "If you can read this, thank your teacher" — The role of the teacher as educator is soon forgotten once the lesson is learned. Our Staff Development Department brochure exclaims "When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'" Perhaps this should be our bumper sticker! We feel we have accomplished our educational role when we come back into the city and someone comments, "Yes, I remember you, you were here when we developed our program!"

Once during our congressional hearings to create the corporation, a congressman asked, "Mr. Whiteside, I don't understand. Your program is not that complex. It seems to me that if you got 50 or 60 reasonable people together you could develop the program in a much shorter time."

My reply was direct and to the point. "Congressman, I would be glad to, if you would produce a group of 'reasonable men'."

I only use this to make the point that general semantics gives us the base to recognize that people are not logical or predictable. It seems to us that this orientation has made us successful and recognized. We recognize that we cannot predict or control and, paraphrasing the Heraclitus quote referred to in Wendell Johnson's People in Quandaries, "the same man never enters the river twice."

We substitute the words lender, city official, and community resident, then add Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and a dash of Hayakawa, Bois and Korzybski. -- That recipe captures the essence of our developmental process. We state that our "process is as important as our product." We use the Korzybskian orientation of the word "process" and mean it as a statement of energy changing the nature of 'reality'.

We believe our work is the only national program based on the application of general semantics. We believe that this general semantics orientation is critical to our success and continue to see ourselves as educators using these tools. Our role is to encourage others to become aware of their assumptions and their own thinking and analytical process as they develop leadership tools for a continued partnership based on trust and acceptance.

There are two critical factors to the success of our program -- scale and approach. The scale is small, and the approach is general semantics.

The principles and formulations of general semantics are effective and have proven themselves both for the Coro program (which now has 800 graduates -- most of whom are in public service) and in our Neighborhood Reinvestment program development.

Our hope, of course, is to influence others to have a process approach to the delivery of government service with the recognition that people's understanding of any program is as important as the conceptual framework of the program itself.

We are very conscious that language creates 'reality'. We are delighted and sometimes dismayed when our language becomes the copy for other agencies.

However, there is a real joy to the work we do. It is intense, complex, emotional, but very satisfying.

BIOGRAPHY



Mr. Whiteside is Executive Director of the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation.

He joined the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in 1970 and originated the programs which led to the creation of the Urban Reinvestment Task Force, which was succeeded in 1978 by the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation. He serves concurrently as Director of the Office of Neighborhood Reinvestment of the Federal Home Loan Banks. During the preceding 15 years, he was associated with the Coro Foundation, a non-profit educational institution which specializes in training for public and urban affairs. Mr. Whiteside was Vice President and Director of Southern California Programs of the Coro Foundation. During the 1960's, he had housing experience in syndicating, developing and managing apartment projects in Southern California.

His educational background includes: B.A. in Economics, Stanford University, 1952; internship in Public Affairs, Coro Foundation, San Francisco, 1954; M.A. in Economics, Stanford University, 1955.

His community activities have included: Chairman, Los Angeles Leadership Development Project, National Urban League; Vice President, Hacienda Heights (California) Improvement Association.

In addition to the general semantics training discussed in his paper, Mr. Whiteside is also planning a week-long general semantics course as part of the curriculum of an in-house 'school' at Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation in Washington. The program is scheduled to begin in the spring of 1982.

Mr. Whiteside was born in Long Beach, California. He now resides in Washington, D.C.

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The English use of arse where an American uses ass is the basis of this report: "An alderman of one of our towns in the provinces ... would not give his vote for the building of a urinal. However, upon learning what it was that he had opposed (for he was used to more homely language), he said that if that was what they spoke of he would vote not only for a urinal but for an arsenal. (A.W.R.)