



"The significant problems we face cannot be solved with the same level of thinking we used to create them." Albert Einstein

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## We Are All In This Together, by Dr. Moira N. Wilkinson

Tuesday, February 14, 2012 at 10:35AM

You've likely heard that phrase before; it's a common enough idea with lots of variations on the theme: "All for one and one for all!" "The more the merrier!" to name just a couple. We might get so used to hearing it that we tune out to its full significance.

It's more than a sound bite or a fun thing to imagine. It is, in fact, a Mental Model of Sustainability. I am totally on board with the goal and *still* stumble sometimes putting it into action consistently. I'm struck by how hard it is to retrain my brain to shift toward that new way of thinking. Even doing this work full-time, when push comes to shove, sometimes I revert to doing things on my own; which is ironic because it's precisely when things get hardest that it's MOST important to bring in your crew.

Inevitably, when the moment passes, I'm left with two conclusions: a) it's not nearly as fun as it would have been if I'd been doing it with folks along the way, and b) the product would have looked different, and maybe better. Don't get me wrong—I love the way my mind works and the creative things it thinks of – the thing is I like the way ALL minds work and that each comes up with different responses. So I'm always left wondering, "what if..." How much more creative and win-win the product (insights and responses to the same issue) might have been with more fabulous minds working on it with me? We know that asking different questions and activating the creative process are two good strategies for shifting mental models, so I'll pose the same questions to you that I ask myself in this situation. Think about them. See what YOU come up with!

What would it mean to our work if we took it to heart that we are all in this together—**truly**? In a world where we are all in this together there is no "they" only "we." If we act on the principle of being in this together, how differently would we draw on the support and resources that we offer each other in the NJ Learns Community? What would change in the way we approach the people we want to influence—especially those we seem most **UN**like or with whom we disagree the most? (Yes, THAT person.) How would this change your life, or the face of the community you live in, now and in the future?

We're all still learning how to put this into action and there's no single correct way to do it. Everyone's got a good story about how this goes for them, the highs and lows. Check out the story below to get a window into the work of our Hillsborough team to see how they're working together to build a broad foundation in their town.

In the last four years, sustainability has become a part of everyday language for more and more people. There is more mainstream information and acceptance about the causes of unsustainability, and more resources, like Sustainable Jersey, to help individuals and communities learn about behavior changes that contribute to

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sustainability. As a result, over the years, the number of applicants to the *NJ Learns* program has increased three-fold, and the quality of applicants has improved notably. Applicants are clearer in their motivation for doing this work, have diversified teams, and are more organized in their ability to take strategic action toward their visions.

The Hillsborough team is an example of that. Their five person team is comprised of two self-identified “concerned residents” (one of whom is a parent of school-aged children), a School Board Member, a business person, and a public school teacher. This mixed team is an example of how the Keystone Year seeds change on an organizational level by bringing individuals and teams from schools and communities to learn and change together for the shared goal of sustainability. They joined NJ Learns for several reasons, among them that they have strong ties with Sustainable Jersey and had heard Winnie Fatton from Sustainable Jersey talk about the transformational changes that can occur after a team experiences the *NJ Learns* program.

According to Bill Dondiego, the team’s vision was always about “awareness and support.” At the outset of the Keystone Year, the team had their sights set on systemic change in the town, working together to expand people’s understanding of sustainability to include an awareness that thinking, learning, and education have a role in the shift toward sustainability. Children and young people are pivotal players in this vision. As Bill put it, the “Start young, so they know and respect the Commons. If they respect the Commons, they’ll respect each other.” To that end, each team member is working from their particular place in the system to create conditions for Hillsborough residents of all ages and in all sectors of the city—government, schools, business, etc—to make the connections between sustainability and learning together.

He’s convinced that if they can increase awareness and provide support, “the whole state can move the needle forward. We get to follow in the footsteps of others who went before us and be the next in line to grow this. It’s going to take knowledge, truth, and integrity to achieve our long-term mission.”

This “we are all in this together” orientation, fundamental to EfS, shows up in the team’s actions to make connections across sectors within their town and beyond

Hillsborough’s borders, too, as evidenced by the range of actions below:

- In town, Bill is applying to be on the energy council in the hopes of creating a nexus between agencies.
- Other members of the team are participating in the Citizens’ Campaign class for Citizen Legislators to parlay EfS more effectively in the government sector.
- At the same time, the team recently organized the [Central Jersey Green Teams Best Practices Conference](#) focusing on energy, transport, and recycling, and which was attended by about 65 people from more than ten municipalities.
- They applied for, and won, a “Green Maps” grant with Montgomery, Princeton, and Lawrence to map sustainability along that corridor.
- They have taken on an informal mentorship role with NJ Learns team from Jersey City, sharing their resources with the relatively less wealthy city to the north.

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