

# VIEW FROM THE TOP:

## UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY AND ACHIEVING RESULTS

*by Father Charlie Fermeglia,  
Sister Jeanette Braun, & Debbe Kennedy*

### Discovering Common Ground

It seems reasonable to assume most of us think what we do is highly unique—and collectively, we would have to admit that when looking for advice and inspiration for innovation, we, more commonly, are drawn to people and organizations like us versus those who are different. However, there are signs we are changing. For example, who could have imagined a decade ago that ScientificAmerican.com would feature Maya Angelou's celebrated poem "Human Family" for its "60 Seconds of Science" in May 2014. We turned to the wisdom in her poem as we wrote this article. It served as an encouraging invitation to share with you on common ground: *"I note the obvious differences between each sort and type, but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike."*

At first glance, it still might seem somewhat strange for a parish priest, a former IBMer, and a Sister of Notre Dame to team up to share a set of universal principles for building community and achieving results with organizations and businesses across the world. We pondered this thought ourselves. However, the facts prove that all of us have actually been through a great deal together in recent years. Across all sectors, it hasn't mattered if you were in business, a nonprofit, a government agency, a school, hospital, or church, or were an individual. We have all shared the same days of reckoning. The harsh realities didn't discriminate and the struggle to regain our footing, to reengage people—to move beyond uncertainty—has been humbling for the best of us.

We have also shared the experience of renewal, sometimes in collaboration with those we might not have thought about at one time. The lesson quickly learned is that differences are an asset when it comes to getting things done better and faster—and that collaboration outside

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*“there is always room for  
one more.”*

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the walls of the past brings benefits for everyone who participates. We’ve also been lifted by watching the most passionate among us be drawn to pioneer the uncharted approaches for the new era we are creating together.

This article shares one of those stories. It is a simple one that invites us to return to what has always been universally good and true in our respective work. It comes with lessons learned to remind us, actionable ideas to put into practice, and defined pathways to *results achieved* to inform and inspire any organization. Like many innovations, it all started with a *spark*—a *great idea* that ignited between two seemingly unlikely partners.

## The Priest and the Wine Merchant

In the fall of 2012, there was no brainstorming or long conversations needed to prompt the *great idea*. It was a simple exchange between Fr. Charlie Fermeglia and Clyde Beffa, co-owner and wine director of K&L Wine Merchants. They stood outside at Clyde’s car in front of the rectory at Our Lady of the Pillar Catholic Church in Half Moon Bay, California. Clyde unloaded some wine as a gift for the priests and mentioned that he wanted to do something special in honor of his mother’s life. Fr. Charlie popped the question, “How about a wine tasting?” Clyde’s answer was “Yes!”—and the rest is history. What followed in less than 6 weeks would engage the parish family and gather people from the greater community. The 3-hour event would also spawn the Table of Plenty (TOP), a weekly supper for struggling families, seniors, and homeless people in our coastal community—and what could be a more moving tribute to Mary Beffa, an immigrant mother,

than to know her son is carrying on the legacy that she taught him at the table, “there is always room for one more.”

Again at first glance, one might think these two innovators didn’t have much in common. However, the partnership isn’t so surprising once you know that love of family and deeply held values are the common ground. Both are sons of immigrant families. Both love cooking and good food. Both care about their community and the people in it—and were raised by mothers who planted the seed—the one that shapes who we become and how we see and care about the world around us.

## From Idea to Start-Up: Six Weeks of Learning

Of course, there were a few quick and hard lessons to learn before all this came to life. Producing a wine tasting event was new to Fr. Charlie—and the notion of the Table of Plenty had not yet emerged; Sr. Jeanette had not yet arrived on the scene. However, there was a great need to bring people together, and tasting wines from around the world provided a fun, community-building opportunity. The work began by forming a small multitalented, cross-disciplinary wine tasting leadership team. Fr. Charlie hand selected a few people known for delivering results. Debbe Kennedy was his first recruit. She knew nothing about wine tasting events either. Together, they faced the first jolting reality 2 weeks into the planning: No one wanted to buy a ticket to the wine tasting. Some hadn’t a clue what it was or why they should attend.

The problem solving began when *necessity* assumed her *motherly* role. The invention of a meaningful purpose for the wine tasting emerged unexpected during a wild drive over the winding road to Half Moon Bay. This time, Debbe asked a question: What have you always wanted to do? Fr. Charlie began rattling off every detail (right down to the meal itself) that he had envisioned about what would become the Table of Plenty, a weekly supper for the hungry. He spoke of the need he knew existed and of inspirations experienced in Half Moon Bay and San Francisco, as well as biblical

stories of Jesus feeding the hungry and helping the needy. “The vision isn’t a soup-kitchen buffet, but a nice sit-down meal respectfully served on tables with tablecloths. It’s exciting to me to think that something like this could be a bridge to communication among people of different cultures, lifestyles, opinions, of faith or of no faith.”

The vision for the Table of Plenty gave everyone something significant to believe in. Clyde Beffa and his daughter Kerri mentored us on how to create a great wine tasting—and the first Annual Wine Tasting Fall Fundraiser had over 300 sets of fingerprints that helped in some way to *set the table* for our first 50 suppers held in 2013 on Thursday evenings.

From the beginning, the whole idea of creating a memorable legacy struck a chord in everyone’s heart. We learned that when you see a need and it sparks the imagination of a community, they will throw themselves into it with love, care, and devotion.

## The Table of Plenty: In the Beginning...

The Table of Plenty’s first year as a start-up demanded a lot of hard work from all of us, but it also came with three notable gifts: (1) We raised enough money at the wine tasting in our first year to be a fully funded, self-sufficient nonprofit start-up that learned to live within its means. This gave us independence and it meant that we could focus on creating a strong, sustainable structure and a memorable experience for all our guests. (2) Fr. Charlie hand picked Sister Jeanette Braun (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur) to serve as our director. She was new to our community and already had a full-time job, but her many talents made her the perfect choice. He asked and she accepted the challenge. Under her leadership, *the view from the TOP* came to life; the initial vision was fulfilled. (3) We were blessed with Table of Plenty volunteers. People wanted to be part of it. Many volunteers helped us create the wine tasting experience, so they were already smitten with the idea and wanted to contribute to its founding. Other people had come to the wine tasting party or read about the event in the newspaper and called to



**FIGURE 1.** TABLE OF PLENTY’S WELCOME SIGN; IT GREETES OUR GUESTS WHEN THEY ARRIVE EACH WEEK

join the ranks—and parents wanted their children to experience this very special opportunity to learn what it means to serve others.

## Leadership Reflections: Four Decisions That Worked for Us

There were many meaningful lessons to learn about people and organizations. Although the Table of Plenty’s mission may be very different from your organization’s, it doesn’t seem so far-fetched that during this great time of turmoil in our world the lessons learned, at their core, do have relevance to the needs of people and workplaces everywhere.

When we served our first Table of Plenty meal, we began with the knowledge of two conflicting facts: The 2012 American Community Survey, prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, reported our county was among the 25 wealthiest counties (with populations

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## *There are many forms of hunger.*

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over 65,000 or greater) in the United States, whereas the local Second Harvest Food Bank serving our county estimated that one in four individuals is at risk for hunger (vs. one in six nationally). These realities begged a question: In a place of such prosperity, why should anyone go hungry?

We soon learned something we didn't expect: there are many forms of hunger. Some people need food. Others need companionship. Some need a listening ear, a little advice and encouragement. We all like the feeling of being remembered and called by our name. We like being surrounded by beauty; add music and it can lift our spirits. We all want to belong; to feel a part of something that matters—and you can reach us best when we hear your message in our language. These hungers never take a holiday and we all have them.

The following are four early decisions we made that worked for us. Perhaps they will inspire new thinking or a new idea. We also translated what we have learned into a set of universal principles for building community and achieving results that we hope will be useful:

- 1. Striving to create a memorable experience.**

Every week, an empty meeting hall is transformed by Table of Plenty volunteers into a beautiful dining room, complete with tablecloths, fresh flowers, real plates and flatware, and music. Each guest is greeted, seated, and served a warm, healthy meal by our TOP volunteer servers wearing black aprons. Our Table of Plenty badges with our names on them and the black aprons we wear have become cherished symbols of our work together. We assume a special role when we wear them to serve our guests. Sample meal: pasta with meat sauce, garlic bread, organic green salad, freshly baked pie, and a choice of beverages. Our first guest feedback written on a chalkboard was affirming: “The food was delicious! The pasta and sauce was warm and comforting. I could tell that it was not from a can. I knew it was made with love. Thank you!”
- 2. Establishing *loving one another* as a core principle.**

We honor the dignity of each person and strive to nurture the spirit of kinship. We work to share our lives with our guests. It creates a very different kind of relationship with people when we see them in this light. Our TOP volunteers range in age from 13 to 80+. Whether we shop for food, cook it, serve it, clean up, or greet our guests, our standard is high: We all strive to reflect *loving one another* as each volunteer puts his or her fingerprints on creating a memorable supper for everyone each week. This makes for great teamwork. After serving more than 12,000 meals since we started, it is obvious that we have grown as people. TOP volunteers work together, bringing their smiles, warmth, and kindness to each guest, who may *hunger* for more than food.
- 3. Collaborating with local community partners strengthens the organization.**

We spread a *wide net* to build alliances and find collaborators. There is a scene in the classic film *Gandhi* which describes exactly what happened to us. Gandhi is talking to an Anglican priest, who showed up unexpectedly, wanting to help. He asked Gandhi if he was surprised to see him. Gandhi replied, “Not anymore... At first I was amazed... but when you are fighting in a just cause, people seem to pop up—like you—right out of the pavement.” So they did. We've built a network of mentors, supporters, sources of food, volunteers, innovators, and new guests (e.g., from our local organic farm to other community organizations serving the hungry; from the Boy Scouts and the 4-H Club to local restaurants, our high schools, parish classes, and businesses where we discovered common ground we didn't expect to find).
- 4. Achieving goals matters.** By the end of its second year in December 2014, the Table of Plenty had served over 100 delicious suppers every Thursday

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## *Serving others changed us all.*

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evening for 80–130 hungry men, women, and children, while achieving its organizational goals:

Building and keeping a TOP volunteer team that is *second to none* and operates with repeatable processes, making it possible to serve our guests with love and effectiveness.

Controlling the rate of our growth, so we deliver excellence within our budget.

Proving TOP consistently operates as a *self-sufficient* nonprofit since its first supper served in January 2013.

In reflection, serving others changed us all. At the end of our first year, Fr. Charlie shared from his experience: “I can see Jesus was a clever guy... He knew that food gathers people. I never fully understood until seeing the Table of Plenty.”

## Universal Principles: Building Community and Achieving Results

The following universal principles can be applied to any organization or business:

### Creating Memorable “Customer” Experiences

- **Repeatable, renewable processes inspire innovation.** A repeatable process makes you efficient. Creating renewable processes invites ongoing refinements to your initial innovations. It avoids settling for “good enough.” It inspires openness and welcomes the next great idea.

- **Beauty matters.** There is wisdom in the old adage, “It’s all in how it’s presented.” What you do is important. How you do it creates distinction. Beauty most often is created and is reflected in qualities that don’t affect the budget: care, a smile, grace, warmth, kindness, thoughtfulness, creativity, attention to small details.
- **Honoring those you serve.** Consciously honoring the dignity in each person you serve leaves an indelible impression. It doesn’t matter if your service is delivered in the mail, online, on the phone, or in-person with your customer. How you deliver your “goods” reflects the love and care you put into the experience you want your “customer” to enjoy. Remember, there is truth in the saying, “*people remember how you make them feel.*”

### Taking Care of Your Business

- **Building a team that is “second to none.”** Who doesn’t like working with an exemplary organization? When there is meaning and value in our contributions, it is fulfilling. This requires (1) creating a strong, sustainable structure with repeatable processes guiding the way; (2) setting high expectations together that clearly defines everyone’s responsibilities—these inspire all of us to reach and achieve the goals we set for ourselves; and (3) taking time to get to know people. Inquiry goes a long way in helping you discern the strengths, gifts, talents, and limitations of each person or partner. This assessment helps you focus on engaging everyone where their strengths and gifts are put to good use, so they experience the joy of contributing their best. The organization benefits from it.
- **Controlling the rate of growth.** However tempting it may be, stay focused on your core mission. If you are a start-up or starting over, what you want most is *stability* while you are developing and refining how to deliver on your promise to your “customers.” Master every aspect of your operation before expanding and diversifying. This gives you an opportunity to develop your reputation for delivering results in an

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## *Stay focused on your core mission.*

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exemplary way while you refine, perfect, grow, and change. Peter Drucker said it best: “Make your contribution; everything else is a diversion.”

- **Consistently achieving results.** Results helps you reach for self-sufficiency as an organization, which is freeing. It calls for *creativity, innovation, and brainpower to be used as a replacement for money* whenever possible. Develop your great idea, plan it out, implement it and make sure you achieve results every time. Why? Results speaks for itself. Achieving results provides a foundation that makes others want to invest and engage in your success.

## **Conclusion: Strong Communities Achieve Results**

How do you know when you’ve built a strong community? We discovered two reliable signs of progress that can be imagined in different forms in any workplace or organization:

1. **Enjoying one another is apparent.** One evening after the Table of Plenty had been in operation about 6 months, there was a change. It was the distinctive sound of human contentment: we could hear people calling one another by name; real conversations were taking place; it had turned into a comfortable place to be. Most often now, this reality is one of the first things a new guest or volunteer mentions to us—and it is a quality that strengthens community.
2. **Collaborating at a higher level.** How everybody works together provides another reliable sign. For us, we began to see that what took place was often more like a *choreographed dance* versus a working

### **FORGING A NEW PATH**

by Debbe Kennedy

On the first Monday after I left IBM to begin a new business, I started the day by tracing how dreams had come true for me in my 21-year leadership career. At the time, my hope was to bolster up courage to start something new and figure out how to do it. What resulted was a simple poem. It has been used by many trailblazers over the years and has since been translated into 16 languages, which affirmed that its message is universal.

Through our many reflections on the remarkable experience of the TABLE of PLENTY’s beginning and where it is today, it is clear to us that it has followed this universal path of achievement. Where will the path take you?

#### **OUR DREAMS IN ACTION**

Dreams give us hope.

Hope ignites passion.

Passion leads us to envision success.

Visions of success open our minds to recognize opportunity.  
Recognition of opportunities inspires far-reaching possibilities.

Far-reaching possibilities help us enlist support from others.

Support from others keeps us focused and committed.

Focus and commitment foster action.

Action results in progress.

Progress leads to achievement.

Achievement inspires dreams.

Dreams give us hope.

by Debbe Kennedy

**FIGURE 2.** FORGING A NEW PATH BY DEBBE KENNEDY

team. For example, at the same time each week, after supper has been served, a group of Portuguese women quietly gathers around a table to roll the flatware into fresh napkins for the following week. It may seem like a mundane task, but it is delicate and done with precision—each one is folded just so and then carefully placed into a handmade wooden box with our TOP insignia on it, created by one of our artisan volunteers. This quality is nurtured when everyone is doing what they do best.



*Father Charlie Fermeglia is founder of the Table of Plenty (TOP), a weekly supper for the hungry in Half Moon Bay, California, where he formerly served as parochial vicar at Our Lady of the Pillar Catholic Church. Under his leadership, the enduring foundation for TOP's success was established by creatively raising the seed money and engaging people across cultures and generations to bring it to life. He continues to actively serve as the Table of Plenty's founder, a valued leadership advisor, and a special guest at our annual wine tasting fundraisers. He is the author of the popular series, INSIGHTS with Fr. Charlie at [www.ourladyofthepillar.org/INSIGHTS](http://www.ourladyofthepillar.org/INSIGHTS). He currently serves in the Brooklyn Diocese near his family.*

It is clear we aren't intended to be alone and isolated. We are created to be in relationship with one another—to serve, to collaborate and innovate together, to build communities that strive to make our world better for everyone. Regardless of our business or organization, when we take time to look for common ground, it makes it possible to learn from each other across all kinds of differences; to build community—and to achieve new levels of contribution and results that we could not accomplish alone.



*Sister Jeanette Braun serves as the director of the Table of Plenty. Under her leadership, the Table of Plenty has provided over 12,000 meals to struggling families, seniors, and homeless people in its first 2 years. She has also been instrumental in developing TOP's volunteer team and everything necessary to create a self-sustaining nonprofit organization, meeting all of its goals. She also serves as associate coordinator for the Sisters of Notre Dame (SND), California Province. She has over 55 years of service with SND. [www.ourladyofthepillar.org/tableofplenty](http://www.ourladyofthepillar.org/tableofplenty)*



*Debbe Kennedy serves as a member of the founding volunteer TOP Leadership Team for the Table of Plenty. She is also founder of the Global Dialogue Center and Leadership Solutions Companies, an award-winning enterprise that has specialized in customized, people-focused leadership and virtual communications solutions since 1990. Formerly, she had a distinguished leadership career with IBM Corporation for over 20 years. She is the author of Putting Our Differences to Work: The Fastest Way to Innovation, Leadership and High Performance. [www.puttingourdifferencetowork.com](http://www.puttingourdifferencetowork.com)*