in the NOISE

Where they will find me with my maps and my faith in the distance, moving farther on. —Jackson Browne

by **Steve Harvill**

We had just finished one of the most challenging projects in recent years. We had been hired to design a process that would generate aggressive growth goals for a company that is the largest and oldest in its industry. With 125 key "players" scattered across the world, this had been a project that easily could have spiraled down a very complex and confusing path.

During our "history dump", where we analyze everything we learn during a project, we kept coming back to how important the noise had been during the process of this specific project.

Noise is the chatter, string of emails, water cooler conversation, conference calls, workgroup discussions, and the heated debate that are generated when choices have to be made that accompany involvement in a process. This noise exists in every process and is often mistakenly devalued as distracting from the goal of developing a quantitative result. Our need to determine worth finds the noise sinking in value faster than the Titanic did when it hit the iceberg.

We believe in simplicity. We use it as the most valuable bullet in our gun. It allows us to have a laser-like focus on results, but it does not stop our minds from finding opportunity in interaction. But simplicity does not require us to ignore the noise. To find ideas in the chaos of open discussion, we actually create forums that allow open flow with little direction. We remove barriers that restrict input and for a period of time, allows everything into the system.

I know, it sounds confusing. How do you "control" something so volatile? How do you stop the noise from drowning out the need to get to your destination? Surprisingly, the noise is both organic and intuitive. If you understand its critical importance in the process, you can mold, push a little, pull a little and discover it almost manages itself. When you listen closely, the noise becomes the music of the process. It has its own rhythm and melody. As Jackson Browne sings, it moves the process farther on, past a limited potential to real and substantive possibilities. Though the project for this company was very specific, the goal development process needed the core elements of specificity, time frames, metrics and accountability. It also had to stimulate ideas, create teamwork and connect on an emotional level in order to generate the energy needed to make the goals reality. Once the energy is allowed to generate, it can be focused toward powerful results, but without the energy, focus is impotent.

Think about it. These goals did not exist prior to the process. They are in addition to the existing workload. You will have to do more or refocus existing work to implement new goals. This takes a new level of commitment, which can only be created through involvement, and when people get involved, they talk, express feelings and ideas—things that don't get recorded or written down. In short, they generate noise.

Here are a couple of examples;

- The first phasein our project involved everyone generating ideas. During some of the conference calls and email strings, we discovered ideas that connected one group with another. Although these ideas were in the noise, they ended up allowing two groups to connect and develop one of the final goals selected.
- During the first "in-person" meeting, we carefully monitored the discussion groups. In the noise we discovered the passionate supporters of key ideas and that allowed us to direct the energy toward a final goal selection

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and develop potential "accountables". "Accountables" drive results. Remember, organizations don't make things happen, people make things happen.

This entire approach was a very non-traditional way of achieving results. It was a hard sell to the client, but the results staggered them. They were amazed at the level of involvement the process generated and each goal in the final selection met every criterion and gained enrollment from the group.

We pushed the way they thought. We moved their mental models farther on, into a distance were the noise became an open element and not a distraction. We moved models to a place where engagement and ideas flowed farther on, past a restricted potential to a realized future where they can become something bigger and grander than they imagined.

It is just plain amazing what can happen when people get together…if you listen to the noise!