



## GETTING TO THE ROOT: MEADOWS FELLOWS BUILD CAPACITY IN SYSTEMS TOOLS

BY EDIE FARWELL

*The Sustainability Institute's Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program trains sustainability leaders in the methods and tools of systems thinking, reflective conversation, and vision. Dr. Donella H. Meadows (Ph.D. in biophysics, Harvard University), a Pew Scholar in Conservation and Environment and a MacArthur Fellow, was one of the most influential environmental thinkers of the 20th century. She founded Sustainability Institute in 1996, with the mission of fostering transitions to sustainable systems at all levels of society, from local to global.*

*Three qualities that Donella combined brilliantly were dedication to scientific rigor, deeply grounded optimism, and the ability to communicate well. Her systems tools enabled her to see clearly the root causes of seemingly intractable problems—poverty, war, environmental degradation—and her deep affection for people and the earth gave her a unique power to reach others. Sustainability Institute believes that the world needs more people with this combination of skills and thus*

*created the Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program.*

*The Fellowship trains people in the context of their current jobs to help accelerate a global shift to economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Fellows are matched with coaches from Sustainability Institute to negotiate an explicit learning plan that includes homework and regular coaching sessions. Additionally, each Fellow is part of a small peer coaching group that meets for the tenure of the Fellowship, and often beyond. Each Fellow is supported and coached in new stages of their ongoing work, grounded in systems analysis, reflective conversation, and vision.*

*The 2005–2006 Fellows are mid-career environmental and social leaders. They come from the non-profit, government, business, and philanthropy sectors. The Fellows convene from 11 states and from Indonesia, Mexico, British Columbia, and Guatemala—from major cities, as well as university towns and rural communities. By design, two-thirds of the Fellows are women.*

*Fellows identify concrete projects, tied to their current work, that involve diverse stakeholders around complex issues of sustainability. The issues they work on require high-level leadership, learning, and sustainability skills. All Fellows are part of an organization, business, or institution so that what they learn affects the system they are part of as well as them individually.*

**T**he first snow of the year fell on the eve of the Fellows' arrival. This was the fourth and final workshop of the second class of Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows' two-year venture, but many Fellows preferred to view it as a beginning—the beginning of a life-long journey together as colleagues and friends. The workshop theme was “Embarking.”

Applying the Fellowship toolset of vision, reflective conversation, and systems thinking to a practical sustainability challenge, Fellows integrated their experiences and assimilated their learnings via a combination of interactive, solo, and reflective exercises.

Peter Senge (long-time Sustainability Institute colleague) had challenged the Fellows at their first workshop to build their capacity in the creative orientation rather than the problem-solving orientation. This culminating workshop provided Fellows with the opportunity to apply everything they'd learned toward this challenge in a series of new exercises we labeled Sustainable Systems Day. Following a four-step process, Fellows used visioning to articulate what they want in their sustainable world, systems thinking to outline the system dynamics of their visions, and then descriptions of the structures, mindsets, and beliefs that would have to be in place to support those visions.

Facilitators divided Fellows into topic areas: Forests, Agriculture, Oceans and Fresh Water.

**Step One:** Fellows came up with a vivid vision of health and sustainability for their topic area. Participants used words, colors, drawings, and pictures to describe their visions.

**Step Two:** Fellows described some of the conditions that would have to be met for their visions to materialize. Certain “stocks” (resources or pollutants) would have to be maintained at a certain level over generations. What are they? What replenishes and what drains them? What information flows are necessary to keep these in balance?

### TEAM TIP

Many times, people attend workshops and learn new methodologies, return to their organizations with sincere intentions to apply their new skills, and, in the heat of day-to-day work challenges, revert to business as usual. One way to sustain the momentum for change is to form a peer coaching group. Peer coaching is a process through which two or more colleagues support each other in building and applying new skills. This support can take place in person, by phone, through email, or in a combination of ways.

**Step Three:** Applying vision to the structures and beliefs that would allow the stocks to persist at desired levels, Fellows envisioned not just what the oceans, forests, agriculture, and fresh waterways look like in a sustainable world, but what the laws, rules, policies, and incentives would have to be to make this vision possible. Beneath that, they envisioned what people would believe—their mindsets—to make them happy to live with such laws, rules, and incentives.

**Step Four:** Fellows then examined the implications for their own work in regards to the conditions for sustainability that they had envisioned.

### A Rich Future

A richness of what a sustainable future could look like came forth. The oceans group came up with the idea of fish nets that would double as filters for pollution. The fresh water group came up with the idea of “watershed nations.” As the name suggests, these are national boundaries designed around watersheds. This group also came up with the idea that products report on the “river-ready-ness” of water used during their production.

In the final exercise of Sustainable Systems Day, participants shared quick images of the sustainable worlds they had been working with:

*The breast milk of mothers everywhere is free of toxins; no human-being is illegal; rituals of gratitude are a regular part of our culture; all of us have young people working side by side with us—we trust and call on their creativity; you can drink the water; zero waste; the patent offices are closed because they acknowledge that the 3.85 billion years of evolution hold all the patents we need; we honor and respect our local communities; as your president, I announce an 8-year, \$100-billion bill to make the U.S. energy independent; an Earth Bible; no road-kill; freshly fixed-up barns still owned by farmers in Vermont; all people everywhere contributing to the sustainability effort.*

Fellows’ effectiveness is the leverage point for bringing about their visions of a sustainable world, so the second day and a half were dedicated to integrating the lessons learned. Interactive exercises, coaching, and structured solo time enabled Fellows to reflect on the ways they’ve grown and changed in the course of the Fellowship, acknowledge developments

**Interactive exercises, coaching, and structured solo time enabled Fellows to reflect on the ways they’ve grown and changed in the course of the Fellowship.**

they’ve seen in each other, and set new intentions going forth. Traveling back in time, Fellows reviewed their experiences over the two-year Fellowship from the moment they read the application.

Each Fellow reflected on what they learned about working for sustainability, specifically what they learned from their experiments in the “learning cycles,” introduced in the first workshop (design strategies → act → assess results → design strategies). In coaching groups, Fellows described those learnings and acknowledged growth in each other.

On the final day, during a series of exercises, Fellows outlined what their intentions and next steps for creating a sustainable world would be. An interactive exchange with several others gave Fellows the opportunity to refine their vision, their next steps, and the support they would need.

A Transition Ceremony marked the end of the formal Fellowship. With a reunion already planned for July in Montana, this second cohort of Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows embarked secure in the knowledge that a new phase of their fellowship had just begun. ■

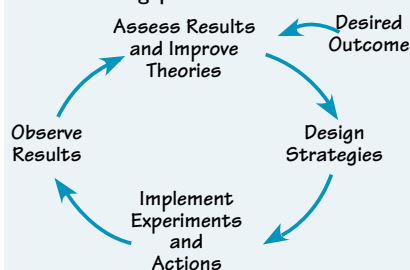
**Edie Farwell** (efarwell@sustainer.org) is program director of the Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program of the Sustainability Institute and lives at Cobb Hill Cohousing in Hartland, Vermont.

For more information see:  
[www.sustainer.org/fellows/index.html](http://www.sustainer.org/fellows/index.html)  
 Donations can be made online at:  
[www.sustainer.org/SIinfo/donationform.html](http://www.sustainer.org/SIinfo/donationform.html)

### RIGOROUS LEARNING

We take “learning” to mean “building the capacity to take effective action.” And our approach to facilitating learning in sustainability leaders is to support them to engage in an iterative learning cycle built on action and reflection.

With the one-on-one coaching from a professional, leaders assess their results from their work relative to their most ambitious desired outcomes, identify the gaps, and design strategies that would close those gaps.



For example, they may decide they need to collaborate more with colleagues, change their strategy for passing a certain law, or, more personally, speak more passionately and less analytically in public settings.

Supported and encouraged by their coach and peers, who are engaged in similar work, they design and implement experiments and actions in their real world setting (e.g., meet with another stakeholder, include new content in a speech, draw a systems diagram, notice assumptions they make as they do their work, or try a new approach with a colleague) from which they could learn what works and what does not. With their coach and peers, they observe the results and, again, compare them against their desired outcomes, and continue with another iteration of action and reflection.

The goal of the process is to combine three elements:

- 1) ambitious, real-world risk-taking toward the highest goals the leader can envision for herself and the world;
- 2) nurturing, supportive, safe environment of encouragement and acknowledgment; and
- 3) rigorous use of the scientific method of experimentation, reflection, and conclusion.