

Excerpted and abridged from Consequential Strangers: Turning Everyday Encounters into Life-Changing Moments, **Chapter 2, "The View From Above."**

The Lessons of Bolgatanga

It's no exaggeration to say that some of the most critical issues confronting society today depend on a fresh perspective and on the ability to collaborate with consequential strangers who might see the same problem from a different vantage point. Eva Schiffer demonstrated this in Bolgatanga, an arid border town in the Upper East region of Ghana. The 33-year-old social scientist was sent there to advise the White Volta Basin Board, a "multi-stakeholder governance organization responsible for overseeing local water resources." In plain English, Schiffer had to somehow coax a common vision out of seventeen wildly different people who had both a role and an interest in how water was used—a problem we see in our own backyard as well.¹

... A country the size of Oregon with over six times its population, Ghana is plagued by poverty, erratic electric power, and the ever-present threat of famine and disease. Life expectancy is 56. Water shortages and water pollution not only compound these challenges, they put an already vulnerable region at risk of terrorism.² In 1998, rebounding from yet another paralyzing drought, the National Water Resources Commission of Ghana decentralized the system by creating a series of basin boards to coordinate policies at the local level. Theoretically at least, the various members of these boards would combine resources and know-how to develop an integrated system of water management that would benefit all parties.

However, when Schiffer began working with the White Volta Basin Board, which was inaugurated in 2006, each member of the group had a different agenda and perspective. They talked about the problem, Schiffer recalls, "as if there were many different waters—irrigation water, drinking water, water as a part of an ecosystem. In the end, though, it's just one water and by making their decisions without coordination, the agencies just move their problems to the next agency and cannot find holistic and sustainable solutions." The board also lacked enforcement authority. If members agreed, for example, that farming close to the river caused siltation—erosion of the banks which then blocks the flow—they had no way of stopping the practice. "My job

was to help them better understand the situation on the ground—who's important, who might be able to police these practices, and who might come up with an alternative," Schiffer explains. "Sometimes you don't need enforcement to solve a problem. You need money or someone who's more influential. "

In order to untangle "complexities that are not easily grasped," Schiffer figured out a way to give board members an aerial view of their situation. Adapting principles of social network analysis, she helped them chart what she calls an "influence map." It is built around four basic questions: Who is involved? How are the players linked? What are their goals? and How influential is each one?

Starting with a large piece of blank poster board—the yet undrawn "map"—Schiffer represents the participants with Ludo "men" (smooth, two-inch, torso-like wooden figures used in a popular Ghanaian board game—imagine Fisher-Price "little people: without faces or outfits). Using post-it notes, she identifies each "person" by name.

...for interviewees who are there in the moment, the approach offers amazing clarity and sparks invaluable insights about their own and others' perceptions. A seemingly straight-forward question like, "Who is involved?" can elicit dissimilar answers. For example, the basin officer—the only full-time employee on the board—cited many people, while a board member who lived in a village came up with far fewer names. Also, as network analysts often lament, memory is fallible. Even the basin board officer, who was responsible for coordinating all the participants, remarked, "Throughout the discussion I remembered a lot of actors that at first had slipped my mind."

After meeting with basin board members individually, Schiffer continued the process with the group until everyone had seen and discussed each other's maps. Their understanding came not from the finished product, which to an untrained eye, looks like a tangle of boxes and arrows and letters adorned with various game pieces. The process itself was key. As one of the regional technical officers remarked, "For me the most interesting part was putting everyone in influence towers. It's so easy to get the full picture if you have everything in front of you like this."

How well did it work? The governance process in Ghana is slow; and attitudes take longer to shift when you're dealing with seventeen people. Schiffer doesn't boast radical change, but her mission was a success nonetheless. "The activity of sitting together and trying to grasp what this whole network looked like allowed the board basin members to express their views, to talk about their previous experiences, and to figure out how they can put it all together. They have better relations between them as a result and a common vision."

The lessons of Bolgatanga apply to any gathering of individuals who can't get past their own narrow perspectives—battling factions in a neighborhood association, for example. "Very often we just assume that people see things the same way as we do," says Schiffer, "and a lot of the frustration of working with people comes from this fact. They do things that we find 'stupid' in one way or the other, but we don't realize that in their understanding of the situation, their actions make a lot of sense. This is why drawing an influence map together works so well, especially for consequential strangers who are stuck with each other and a task."

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1. Randal C. Archibold, "Western States Agree to Water-Sharing Pact," *New York Times*, December 10, 2007. In the western U.S., where reservoirs are at their lowest level in years, similarly disparate groups of "stakeholders"—residents, real estate developers, manufacturers, environmentalists, wildlife advocates, the Interior Department, and all levels of state and local agencies—have spent years trying reach a consensus.
 2. Thomas Homer-Dixon, "Terror in the Weather Forecast," *The New York Times*, op-ed contribution, April 24, 2007.