

May 12, 2010 Open Mic Recap:

Marty Kurtz, CFP®: the Journey of Leadership

Highlights: *A remarkable hour with FPA President-elect Marty Kurtz, learning about his expanding leadership roles, the personal philosophy underlying his service, and his views on the future of the financial planning profession and industry. Marty personifies the idea of authenticity: in my experience, he always shows up the same way, no matter the setting or the challenge. Participants peppered him with questions and shared their own perspectives, and he received them all with grace and insight. Read on.*

Recap: I welcomed Marty Kurtz, CFP® to Open Mic; he began by sharing the highlights of his several careers: initially in the food distribution business with his father and then with the people who purchased the business; then with his brother-in-law in insurance sales; and after earning the CFP® in the late 1980s and "falling in love with the financial planning process," he began The Planning Center (TPC) in Moline, IL in 1998, with "**People First**" as its driving value. I love what Marty said in explaining the meaning of that phrase: "Vendors are people, too."

TPC serves 180 families, with six full-time employees and three part-owners. He walked us through the backgrounds of TPC's members (two of whom, I was delighted to learn, were on the call. My bet is that Kathy and Tracy wanted to hear Marty's reflections because, given his greatly expanded FPA Board role since November, they're not getting as much face (or ear) time as before.) Marty described one of the young partners, Matt, as "the son of a client, and I watched him grow up." (He's not exaggerating the 'grow up' part; Matt is around 6'7".) I have been privileged to do some work with TPC over the last several years, and have gotten to know and admire everyone associated with the firm. The one and only time when Marty gave a self-assessment that didn't deflect his own contribution, he told me that "I know how to pick people." Last December, I attended one of TPC's holiday Open Houses, and marveled at the chemistry and the community atmosphere; obviously, Marty and TPC also know how to "pick" clients.

During the past four or five years, I've observed him taking on greater and greater responsibilities. He noted that he's "thrilled to be in FPA leadership, because I've benefited so much from being a member and from the life planning conversations I've been able to engage in." Using Ken Wilbur's Quadrant framework, Marty noted that "as financial planners, we're getting better and better at the individual and interior levels", but not so good about "the 'We' discussion" (about client-planner relationships, community conversations and the like). He became involved with the Art of Hosting, or AoH, (www.artofhosting.com) and has used some of its methodologies to have more powerful conversations. In October, 2008, in the heat of the market meltdown, the firm introduced "TPC Café" discussions with groups of clients, in which TPC members 'sat and listened' through clients' anxieties and concerns. The message

that TPC sought to give was "We're not in control of the financial future; we walk through it with you."

When I spent a day with TPC last December, we met in circle format (one of the core AoH methods). It was exhilarating to witness and facilitate comfortable, candid, and productive conversations in a workplace setting. I asked Marty to talk about his role in addressing the crisis involving the resignation of five members of the CFP Board's Discipline and Ethics Commission (DEC) several years ago. With characteristic humility -- and incisive insight -- he characterized his role as being "the last guy standing," with his being well-positioned to speak to all parties and bring them together. Having been Chair of the DEC several years prior, he knew and respected the various parties, and was yet to be elected to the FPA Board; therefore he could capitalize on the credibility he had built over time (and would have compromised had he been an FPA Board member at that time). "If someone else had been better positioned, I would've easily stepped aside. In the absence of that person, I asked myself, 'If I don't do this, who will?'" He stepped in and compelled a six-month dialogue that "had some successes and enabled us to meet in the middle." About that time, the Financial Planning Coalition (NAPFA, CFP Board, and FPA) began, of which Marty is a member; its work continues to this day.

Having previously run for a seat on the FPA Board (a bit of history I didn't have) he was successful the second time out. Knowing that he was the first Board member ever to run for President-elect in his first year on the Board, I asked him essentially, "What were you *thinking*?" He had wondered if he was ready, and consulted many Board leaders to gauge their perception of his readiness. Receiving their support for becoming a candidate (as distinct from committing to vote for him), he found the process "a great experience," giving him the opportunity to clarify and express his views and priorities, engage in a variety of conversations with Board members, and ask them a lot of questions so that he could learn more in the process. Was he as surprised as I was to hear of his election? "Definitely!"

Among the questions I had sent him prior to Open Mic was "*If you could use three adjectives to describe your first six months as President-elect, what words would you choose?*" Here is what he answered:

"Introspective" (giving him the continuing opportunity to pay attention to what he is thinking, feeling, and sensing, and "the story I'm telling myself"),

"Humbling" (keeping a level and right-sized head amid the vastly increased attention and affirmation he's been receiving), and

"Wonderfully enjoyable" (having the opportunity to have so many meaningful conversations, including with folks on today's OM call). I asked him to summarize his next month's travel schedule, which he had mentioned before the call (because it's mind-boggling to envision a route that goes from NexGen in Estes Park to Denver for FPA Board meetings to FPA of Cedar Rapids (IA), to

Budapest (for a meeting of East European planners interested in forming an FPA type organization) to Boise (family time) and back to Moline.

How can he maintain that kind of travel schedule? With TPC as an ensemble practice, and with Kathy, Tracy, and Andrew (Matt's brother) managing customer relations, Marty is able to spend 4-to-6 hours per day in FPA-related telephone meetings and be away for stretches of time. That and, of course, a very supportive wife and children. Sounds to me like a recipe for (and the necessary components of) finding the experience "wonderfully enjoyable" (as opposed, for example, as "terribly stressful.")

What gives Marty hope and optimism for the future of financial planning and the economy? Using a bicycling analogy, he noted that "We (financial planners) have the wind at our backs. We put clients' interests first. I have an abiding faith that the world is moving towards a focus on consumers' interests above our own; why else would we fight for a fiduciary standard?" He added that "fiduciary" in some form will prevail - if not in the current financial industry reform legislation, then eventually. "The message from our clients is clear: 'We don't want you on both sides of the trade.'" He added, in a phrase which epitomizes his approach, "It doesn't seem too much to ask." Well, sure, when you put it that way...

Asked about his concerns about the future, he gave a solution-centered rather than a problem-centered answer: "We're an extremely diverse profession, with a variety of missions, visions, approaches. We need to learn how to talk together and build on commonalities, not our criticisms; to meld our values together, and create an understanding that we truly are all in it together. It's not Them; it's Us." (Kind of the converse of the classic comic strip in which Pogo says, "We've met the enemy, and they's us.")

Projecting ahead, I asked what he would like to be able to say at the end of his three-year leadership cycle. Refusing to give into the temptation to say "I want to have accomplished __," he said that he's confident that other voices will be coming up: "There's a lot of fine people working throughout FPA - Nex Gen, MPACT, Art of Hosting, talk of getting the Residency Program back up, all the chapters' leadership. What a great profession; what a great journey! We move so fast, we forget to look around and see what we have. There will be other voices (of leadership) coming up over the next three years. I just want to help pave the path for them. The worst thing would be to focus on what a great leader someone is." It sounds just like the Marty that I know, only perhaps more so. He ended with a plug for FPA members to become involved: committees, chapters, blogs, task forces, and more: for each one to decide, "I'm going to be an owner, and make a difference." Vintage Marty.

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