

ICMA's 2007 Strategic Leadership and Governance Award in the greater-than-50,000 population category goes to the city of Yuma, Arizona, and City Administrator Mark S. Watson for the Master Thinker/"Communities That Think" Program.



MARK S. WATSON

Once a small farming community, Yuma, Arizona, is now one of the nation's fastest-growing areas, with a burgeoning Latino population and a steady stream of Californians seeking a lower cost of living. In addition to the three core economies of agriculture, military, and tourism, surging trade with Mexico has sparked growth in services and transportation. And as a key entry point for immigrants in the United States, Yuma has attracted the attention of the nation as well as of agencies that monitor the flow of immigration. How can a small city handle the opportunities and challenges of this magnitude?

It was clear that the traditional approaches to planning and managing the city were inadequate to deal with Yuma's explosive growth and international border situation. Other limitations included citizen apathy and nonparticipation in government, and the lack of skills and experience among community leaders and surrounding local governments to address such issues. The answer, according to City Administrator Mark Watson, an ICMA Credentialed Manager, was to strategically and systematically build the thinking skills of staff, elected officials, business and community leaders, and citizens so that, through collaboration, exploration, and constructive thinking, they could challenge the status quo, generate ideas, consider multiple views, explore, debate, work with

concepts, synthesize, and ultimately make value-based decisions to overcome the challenges facing Yuma and design the city's future. This was the genesis of Certified Master Thinkers™ and the "Communities That Think" program.

The aim was to *go wide*, starting at the top of the organization; *go deep*, considering those in the succession for management; and *go fast*, to keep the momentum going. To accomplish this, "Communities That Think," which began in 2005, relies on four central principles:

- **Train:** To develop the necessary thinking skills, individuals must become certified as Master Thinkers™. Certification requires in-depth understanding and use of the comprehensive thinking tools and systems developed by Dr. Edward de Bono, the world's authority on the direct teaching of thinking and creativity. Candidates must participate in six days of classwork followed by one-on-one sessions with a facilitator coach. Within the first two years of the program in Yuma, more than 150 people, including staff, community members, and elected officials, obtained certification.
- **Sustain:** Sustainability is essential to affect a culture change. To remove the fear typically associated with exploration and innovation, a support infrastructure was needed. First, three staff from diverse departments were developed as certified trainers in the Master Thinkers curriculum,



Building thinking skills strategically and systematically

enabling them to conduct training within the community. Second, 11 staff from nine departments, including the city administrator, a fire captain, a court officer, the public works manager, the art center and civic center manager, and the training and development program manager, were educated as accredited facilitators; it was their responsibility to transform the thinking culture and find ways to sustain the transformation. Third, because succession planning is needed for sustainability, certification is required for management. Finally, Master Thinking tools and systems are mandatory within the organization.

- **Share:** The city shares its knowledge and skills generously. Facilitators are available throughout the community and the state to assist anyone with planning agendas, refining focus statements, and facilitating meetings. They share the city's unique approach at regional and national conferences and often consult with other government entities.
- **Model:** Yuma is the only government entity in the world to train citizens and staff in these tools and to apply them comprehensively.

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sively. Master Thinkers are often asked to lead meetings because they are able to find the right focus, keep the discussion on track, and move the group toward good decisions.

The first two years of the program cost about \$250,000, including consultant fees and materials, but these costs are insignificant when compared with the tangible monetary savings and the intangible value gain. In tangible savings, meeting times have been literally cut in half; a planned \$80 million freeway extension was removed from the master transportation plan; and the Women's Softball League, which was nearly shut down because of issues with league players, was saved. As for the intangible value gain, council and community members are willing to collaborate, explore, and think creatively with a clarity of focus on value-based decisions.

As Mr. Watson and the city council have shown, it is possible to change the thinking culture. By shaping the focus, choosing the right thinking tools, eliminating arguments, and reaching decisions, Master Thinking has encouraged the community of Yuma to embrace collaboration, exploration, and innovation.