



THE LITTLE RED HEN AND THE PARADOX OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Remember the story of the Little Red Hen who tried to engage her friends to help her to plant wheat and then harvest it, make flour and eventually bake bread? She could not engage them until, of course, the bread had come out of the oven and was ready to eat.

Technology has brought new expectations for engagement and, like the Little Red Hen's friends, most people want bite-size, ready-baked solutions they can "like." We struggle to mobilize people in doing the heavy lifting required for social change work.

NEW EXPECTATIONS

In our cities and communities a new generation of community engagement is emerging. People want to be engaged in decisions, they want to work together and they want better outcomes for themselves and their neighbours: a collective impact.

Traditional responses by organizations and governments are not responding effectively to these new expectations. We are all so busy "doing" -- moving from idea to idea - in order to meet

organizational objectives. We struggle to slow down and ensure partner organizations, constituents and clients are aligned and collaborating with us. To complicate this, people are less engaged than ever. The civic life of many communities is eroding. Fewer people are volunteering, fewer people are voting, fewer people are belonging to service clubs, churches, voluntary networks, neighbourhood associations and community centres.

How do we resolve this profound paradox? People want to be more engaged and yet fewer people are involved and contributing to outcomes. Like the Little Red Hen asking for help, it is becoming harder to catch people's attention and even more difficult to get their time. What complicates the response is that people are becoming overwhelmed by information and options but are actually less engaged than ever.

The Needs-Features-Benefits Framework focuses on helping an organization to think through the third element of a successful business engagement effort – developing the case for business involvement.

TECHNOLOGY HAS CHANGED EVERYTHING

Every minute of every day our email inbox is filled with people and companies trying to engage us. We are riveted to our Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and the multitude of apps available to help us "stay in touch" and to get the latest news. We do not want to miss anything and we certainly do not want to be the last one to hear about the latest offering or idea. Taking us back to the Little Red Hen story, I can imagine all the farm animals glued to their smart phones feeling extremely engaged in the

affairs of the farm while few people are actually farming.

Technology engages us, we are entertained, moved, connected and involved daily. Technology also distracts us. It is easy to become overwhelmed, unfocused, overcommitted and exhausted by the constant stream of stimulation and requests. As organizational leaders we are compelled to use technology to communicate. It is in every one of our job descriptions and we are valued by our ability to reach out and engage our colleagues, staff, clients and funders. *It is getting harder and harder to break through. The competition to get people to read our social media posts and newsletters, to fill in the surveys we send out or to buy our products is fierce.*

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge warns us that the cure can be worse than the disease. The easy and familiar solution is not only ineffective it can be dangerous. We need to bring systems thinking and system solutions to the work of engagement.

I believe we need to dust off our engagement skills in facilitation, supporting learning communities and dialogue. We need to increase our knowledge of technology and the amazing power it has given us to communicate regularly and effectively with large groups of people. We need to discover, and apply, proven techniques that companies have been using for years to increase customer loyalty. Most importantly we need to understand engagement in the context of how systems change and apply this to what we know about building and sustaining movements for change.

The Little Red Hen would have been wise to slow down, truly understand what was going on, and listen to the animals. If she had understood their natural gifts, workflows and their needs, might she have achieved a different result?

LEARN MORE

- Download the [21st Century Civic Infrastructure under Construction](#) report by the Aspen Institute
- Read the [Roundtable on Community Engagement and Collective Impact](#) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Fall 2014.

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