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Deepening community

Realizing the potential of citizen leadership

by Sylvia Cheuy

“The world doesn’t change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what’s possible. Community is the answer. Community is the unit of change. The only way we get through difficult times is together.” – Meg Wheatley

Those of us working in organizations and municipalities can easily find ourselves daunted by the scope and complexity of issues we face. Which should be addressed first? How should we start? How can we respond effectively in the face of growing mandates and shrinking budgets? When doing more doesn’t appear to be the answer, perhaps it is time to take a step back and find ways to view the situation differently.

In June 2015, I re-read John McKnight’s 2013 article “Neighbourhood Necessities: Seven Functions

that Only Effectively Organized Neighbourhoods Can Provide.” In it, McKnight notes that, as non-profits, governments, and businesses occupy less space in society, “the functional space they no longer occupy creates either a crisis or an opportunity.” My Chinese grandfather taught me that, in Cantonese, the character for *crisis* is a combination of two characters: the first is *danger*, the second is *opportunity*. What if we viewed changes through the lens of opportunity? What new possibilities might we uncover?

McKnight reminds us that citizens are essential “producers of well-being,” that citizens need work to restore their capacity to fulfill this role, and that there is an important distinction between “care” and “providing service.” He defines care as “the freely given commitment from the heart of one to another.” While organizations and systems can provide quality services, they cannot provide care.

Deeper communities: The opportunity of our time

Deepening the experience of community in our neighbourhoods and cities is *the* opportunity of our time. It is the work of engaging and reconnecting residents to each other, of facilitating processes that transform isolated individuals into groups of powerfully connected neighbours who can actively co-create a positive future together. When local connections and relationships are cultivated, the community's capacity to care for one another is restored.

Paul Born's 2014 book, *Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times*, serves as an anchor for the work of Tamarack's Deepening Community Learning Community. We are curating the growing body of knowledge – research, programs, policies, and practices – that affirms and accelerates the creation of strong communities and neighbourhoods. Our work answers the book's call to “make a conscious, proactive, intentional effort to hold on to and build on the connections between us, connections that will help us resist the pull of the often neurotic social responses to the complexity of our times. . . .” Our shared aspiration is to see



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the power of neighbourhoods and communities recognized and acknowledged as vibrant and resilient. We are engaging community leaders to learn together and identify the shifts in thinking, skills, and approaches required to reweave the social fabric of our communities.

Deepening community for individuals

Loneliness and feelings of isolation can have a devastating impact on our individual health. In *The Village Effect*, author Susan Pinker makes the case that the place where you live makes a difference to your health. She cites a 2003 Harvard study which demonstrated that “social capital – as measured by reciprocity, trust, and civic participation – was linked to a community's death rates. The higher the social capital, the lower its mortality rates, and not just from violent crime, but from heart disease too.”

The power and impact of strengthening community connections was recently illustrated by the Grey-Bruce Health Unit in Ontario. Their team partnered with Tamarack on a local Deepening Community Initiative, which hosted 47 conversations between diverse citizens across their rural region. These conversations built consensus around six priority issues for shared action and generated measurable results in participants' experience of community. Specifically, participating in a community conversation generated:

- An 11 percent increase in participants' sense of connection to one another.
- A 22 percent increase in participants' awareness of the experiences and perspectives of each other.
- A five percent increase in participants' willingness to work together to strengthen their community.

As one participant noted, “strengthening connections is important.”

Deepening community for neighbourhoods and communities

A 2012 study by the Vancouver Community Foundation, *Connections and Engagement*, said, “It is only through strong relationships that we can care enough to work together to make our community a better place for everyone.”

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The study found that:

- One third of the people surveyed, including 41 percent of those between the ages of 25 and 34, said it was difficult to make new friends in Vancouver.
- One quarter of people reported being alone more often than they would like to be.
- Neighbourhood connections were rated as cordial but weak. Most knew the names of at least two neighbours but did not do simple favours for them.
- When people feel lonely, they are also less likely to feel welcome in their neighbourhood or participate in activities that make it a better place.

In 2013, Edmonton's Highlands Neighbourhood became the launch site for that city's Abundant Communities Initiative. The goal was to "build

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the social fabric of Edmonton's neighbourhoods," and provide a framework to build "collective efficacy" in Edmonton neighbourhoods. After interviewing every household in a particular neighbourhood, project leader Howard Lawrence reported that the conversation data had been collated into a series of lists to help guide neighbourhood decision-making and connect neighbours' interests, skills, and experiences. He cites John McKnight's blog "Gifts, Skills, Interests, and Passions: The Glue that Holds Communities Together," as the inspiration for this project. His own experiences in the Highlands neighbourhood affirms McKnight's observation that, "Whenever a neighbourhood comes together in powerful and satisfying ways, it is because two things have happened. First, they have found out about each other's gifts. Second, they have made new connections based on these gifts. It is the sum of these connections that 'glues' a neighbourhood together."

Deepening community for municipalities

In an article published in *Municipal World Magazine* titled "Social Infrastructure: Underpinning the Success of Cities," Milton Friesen makes the case that in the future, "the most profound and powerful long-term innovations in cities will be social." From

this, he suggests that municipal attention needs to broaden beyond physical infrastructure to consider "the social infrastructure that contributes to thriving cities." This work begins by understanding and effectively engaging the networks of institutions and organizations already operating within the city.

Another important aspect of enhancing the social infrastructure of our cities involves the meaningful engagement of citizens as leaders and partners in shaping its future. In *Community Building: How to Do It, Why it Matters*, Ed Everett, a retired city manager of Redwood City, California, makes the case that being efficient and effective is important and necessary, but insufficient for creating great cities and communities. He observes that many municipalities have embraced a "vending machine form of government with the public viewing themselves as customers," and he asserts that this mindset has "caused them to lose their sense of being responsible citizens and accountable for their community."

Everett believes that embracing a community-building approach offers municipalities an opportunity to facilitate a shift from the "vending machine" form of government to a partnership with residents. "It is important to get your citizens together differently, help them build relationships, share stories, and have conversations about issues that matter to them."

In 2010, the city of Hamilton, Ontario, launched an innovative Neighbourhood Action Strategy to make neighbourhoods better and healthier places for all residents. Now active in 14 of the City's more than 200 neighbourhoods, the strategy engages residents "to identify, plan, and lead the changes they want to see."

Hamilton's process is innovative in that it brings together an asset-based community development approach with a land-use planning process that "depends on the relationships between residents, staff, and other neighbourhood stakeholders." Their experience is that this kind of work has its own unique momentum. "It's not really about the numbers of people involved; it's about the chemistry that happens when people who really care about their neighbourhoods and their neighbours get together to make change."

The importance of championing and developing resident leadership is a core tenant of the Hamilton's Neighbourhood Action Strategy because it is seen as critical to the long-term sustainability of

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community is the answer.**

– Meg Wheatley



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its neighbourhood-focused work. Pat Reid, past Chair of the city's McQuesten Local Planning Team, summarizes this point well, "A resident-led planning team is fundamental to a grass-root movement where residents' voices are heard and where they can put their plans into concrete actions. . . . When the neighbours find their voice and develop skills to articulate ideas into action they give life to a community." The city's Neighbourhood Leadership Institute – a partnership with the Hamilton Community Foundation – helps passionate resident leaders develop the skills needed to translate their neighbourhood project ideas into action.

Relearning the skills to build community

While humans are hardwired to live in community, evidence shows that our actual experiences of being

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in community have been steadily declining since the 1960s. We need a deliberate and intentional effort to

re-learn the skills to effectively build community if we hope to harness its full potential to address the complex issues and opportunities of our times.

As Paul Born observed in *Deepening Community*, the benefits of community are very real. Community helps shape our identity, as well as offering us opportunities to care for others and be cared for ourselves. This builds a sense of belonging that can be a source of support in both good and bad times. However, he also observes that "community is not automatic, and it is not automatically optimal."

So, how do we go about re-learning the skill of building community? Born has identified four specific actions to help deepen the experience of community:

- 1. Sharing our story:** When we share stories about ourselves we open up to one another. This helps to build understanding and establish relationships.
- 2. Enjoying one another:** Spending time together creates a sense of belonging within a group. Finding simple and easy ways to make this happen is important.
- 3. Caring for one another:** This action involves creating places and opportunities to care for – and be cared for – by others regularly. It means knowing that we will be there for one another in sadness and in celebration.
- 4. Working together to build a better world:** When we know, trust, and care for one another,

we naturally reach out and together build the community/world that we want to be part of.

A recent paper published by The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions, *21st Century Civic Infrastructure: Under Construction*, acknowledges that the current civic infrastructure of most cities was not designed with deliberate intention. Their vision is that a 21st Century civic infrastructure should "ignite a cycle of accountability that leads to policy making that produces better social ties and political results."

The four actions of *Deepening Community* offer a foundation for action that support the establishment of a new civic infrastructure by introducing a set of simple actions for those eager to embrace the work of building – and deepening – community.

The simple power of conversations

Liz Weaver offers this advice: "When the work you are undertaking is complex, the tools you use need to be simple." As we search for innovative solutions to the complex issues confronting communities, we discover that hosting and documenting conversations amongst diverse groups of citizens can be a powerful starting-point for uncovering untapped resources.

Our recent work to partner with local community leaders to host Deepening Community Engagement Projects is creating a series of unique action learning opportunities that are simultaneously highly aspirational and profoundly practical. Recognizing that no one sector working alone can effectively address complex community issues, these local projects are providing communities with opportunities to create and strengthen relationships, identify opportunities for shared action, and foster citizen leadership.

Community well-being requires organizations, governments, and citizens to each contribute their unique skills, knowledge, perspectives, and resources. The benefits of this work to communities is powerful. The benefits of embracing this approach for individuals, while not always as obvious, is equally profound: it transforms the place where you live to a place you know and can call home.

Sylvia Cheuy is Director, Deepening Community at Tamarack. Sylvia is passionate about community engagement, multi-sector collaboration, and collective impact. Possible is the result of system change where engaged citizens work together to create dynamic and well-connected places. Reach Sylvia at sylvia@tamarackcommunity.ca //