

DISRUPTIVE LEADERSHIP | BUILDING CAPACITY FOR CHANGING COMMUNITIES

LIZ WEAVER

CHANGE IS EVER-PRESENT.
DISRUPTION REQUIRES LEADERS TO
EMBRACE CHANGE, AMBIGUITY, AND
OPPORTUNITY.

An important sub-theme of the 2016 Community Change Institute, Tamarack's signature learning event, is the Art of Disruption. The notion of disruption has been written about significantly over the last several years, although disruption seems to be more prevalent in private sector examples than in the voluntary or community change sector. The noted Harvard University business professor Clayton Christensen has written about disruptive innovation since 1977. In 2011, a Babson College MBA program advertisement noted that "some 40% of Fortune 500 companies in 2000 no longer existed by 2010." Jay Samit, author of *Disrupt You*, similarly identifies the challenges of not paying attention to the disruptive forces that exist: "While you are lamenting your 'safe' position in life, someone else may be disrupting your entire industry and putting the company you work for out of business. Only 71 companies from the original Fortune 500 list published in 1954 remain on the list. Only 14

percent of the largest, most successful companies survived long enough for an employee to work his or her whole career at one company and retire. Security doesn't rob ambition; the illusion of security robs ambition."ⁱ (p. 25) This certainly is disruption on a scale that demands attention.

Is disruption limited to the private sector? It is clear that community change and impact appears to move more slowly. Unlike the private sector, there is no single CEO in charge of a community. Yet, there are increasing numbers of communities and community organizations facing significant fiscal challenges, with some communities unable to finance their basic infrastructure needs and having to declare bankruptcy. City mayors and elected council members play a pivotal leadership role, but the issues facing cities are increasingly complex, including poverty, homelessness, environmental impact, and the health and well-being of citizens. Some of these challenges fall within the existing scope of city government, but many require the investment of partners from different sectors including business, education, and community leaders. Local governments also work on a four-year election cycle, sometimes hampering their ability to effectively respond to external disruptive forces.

The voluntary or community sector has experienced significant transitions over the last 10 years. Funding has shifted from core to program-based funding. Volunteer and board engagement patterns are shifting from long-term to shorter-term, focused engagement. Community organizations express frustration that the demand for their programs and services, the complexity of issues their clients are presenting, and the accountability and results measures are increasing. The diversity of organizations serving individuals across multiple sectors tends to hide these transitions. Unlike the corporate sector, voluntary or community sector

leaders have their heads down, focused more on service delivery because of the constraints placed on them from external forces including funders, government and risk management. This heads-down focus means that voluntary organizations and communities miss both the impact and the opportunities that lie at the heart of disruptive forces.

LIVING IN THE AGE OF DISRUPTION

Across all sectors, disruptive forces are tangible and present. But what does this mean? Merriam-Webster's definition of disruption is as follows:

disrupt: (*verb dis-rupt*) to cause (something) to be unable to continue in the normal way; to interrupt the normal progress or activity of (something).

The definition of disruption is useful when considering the forces at play in community change. Since its formation in 2002, the Tamarack Institute has been observing, considering, and writing about community, and more importantly community change. Tamarack's thinking has been informed by leaders such as David Chrislip, Jay Connor, and Richard Harwood, who have written extensively about collaborative leadership. Tamarack has also drawn on the knowledge and experience of thought leaders such as Lisbeth Schorr, the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Living Cities and their critical efforts at documenting how community change happens and the fragile nature of this change.

As well, the Tamarack Institute worked with collaborative partners including the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Caledon Institute on Social Policy to experiment with the idea that transformational change is possible when leading from a place-based lens. Vibrant Communities Canada and 13 partner cities have tackled poverty reduction since 2002. Over this period, there have been many lessons learned about community change and about disrupting the status quo.

In 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer, of FSG Social Impact Consultants, published an article in the

Stanford Social Innovation Review called Collective Impact. The article described a cross-sector collaborative framework which, when implemented effectively, was beginning to move the needle on some of the complex problems facing communities. The article cited promising practices including Strive, a cradle-to-career educational effort in Cincinnati; and the Elizabeth River Project, which was turning around a toxic river. Little did the authors realize how this article would become a disrupting force changing behaviours of funders, governments, business, and community leaders.

The article identified what many already recognized: single sector approaches were not getting traction on complex problems. This frustration was being felt across multiple sectors. Although collaboration has always been a mainstay in communities, collective impact brought several important nuances that have disrupted collaboration. The five conditions of collective impact – a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone infrastructure – have provided a framework to build upon.

Since 2011, the number of collective impact efforts have multiplied across Canada, the United States, and internationally. Some have said that collective impact is viral, and that it has disrupted how we think and work in the community change sector. Others are critical of the approach, describing it as business as usual. While collective impact is still in its formative phase, it is clear that this new lens on collaboration is shaking up the old ways of working; it is disrupting our thinking and action.

DISRUPTION AND THE ROLE OF LEADERS

Change is ever-present and yet many of us work hard to resist change and its impact on our lives. Disruption requires leaders to embrace change. An online article published by *Fast Company* identified five habits of disruptive leaders.

1. **They relentlessly pursue the truth.** Disruptive leaders are always testing to make sure their companies' strategies are still effective, and they say so when they aren't.

2. **They guide others through chaos.** A big piece of this is communication. Leaders need to cut through the press-release palaver about “exciting new opportunities” and explain in concrete, practical terms how the changes underway tie into the business objectives: what new moves is the company making, and why. Disruptive leaders empathize with their teams and involve them in their thinking. Chaos with a final destination is somehow a little less chaotic, even if you can’t map out every move that will take you there in advance.
3. **They are decisive.** Even if some decisions involve the most basic of “gut feel,” disruptive leaders need to tell their teams precisely what they want, when and why – and then help to make it happen.
4. **They break the rules and write new ones, but always explain why.** A willingness to break the rules isn’t the same as cheering lawlessness. Embracing disruption means that there’s a new normal, and for as long as it lasts, it’s up to leaders to communicate what it is. If employees don’t know the current rules of the game, the organization can’t play by them as a team.
5. **They thrive on uncertainty.** Leading disruptive innovation means getting used to incredible levels of uncertainty. You never know how something will work until you try it. Modifying your assumptions and adapting your plans depending on your results is the standard practice of the most effective disruptive leaders.ⁱⁱ

Faisal Hoque identifies disruptive leadership habits as being both internally driven and externally relevant. Leaders in environments that are being changed through disruptive forces need to develop a skill set that includes: the ability to embrace change, a tolerance for ambiguity, and the mindset of looking both at the short-term and long-term possibilities. They also need to focus on their leadership skills to include decisive decision-making, communications, and direction-setting.

“Leaders in environments that are being changed through disruptive forces need to develop a skill set that includes the ability to embrace change, a tolerance for ambiguity, and the mindset of looking both at the short-term and long-term possibilities.”

These leadership practices are equally critical in community change efforts. Communities are complex and dynamic entities. Priorities are frequently shifting as new opportunities emerge or forces external to the community have an impact. A shuttering of a major employer, a downturn in the economy, an environmental event such as a flood or tornado, or a change in local civic government can all have significant impacts in the short and longer terms.

Jay Samit, author of *Disrupt You*, encourages leaders to watch for the large forces that are shaping and shifting communities, but to also pay attention to innovations that might be possible to shape at the margins.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Disruptive leadership is different from collaborative leadership. David Chrislip of the Kansas Leadership Centre has informed Tamarack’s thinking and approach to collaborative leadership. In the *Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook*, he describes this form of leadership in the following way:

“The premise of collaborative leadership says: If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization

and community. Each component of the premise is important:

1. You must bring the appropriate people together – the collaboration must be broadly inclusive.
2. You must bring people together in constructive ways – design the process so that it can deal with different understandings of the issues, varying degrees of trust, and so that the process encourages people to work together.
3. Good information is critical to good decision-making – Involve experts in the process as informers, rather than drivers of the process.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What seems to be missing in the premise of collaborative leadership is the dynamic and fluid nature of communities and community change. However, there is a consistent factor between collaborative and disruptive leadership, and that is the focus on communications and decision-making.

WORKING FAST AND SLOW

Disruption and disruptive innovation can take place at the centre and at the margins of communities. Many of us are resistant to change and so the idea of a disruption to the status quo can seem frightening. And yet, there are day-to-day disruptive innovations that have significantly shifted the way we are working, our relationships with each other, and how programs and services are delivered. Consider how technology and social media have transformed our communication patterns. Technology has also become a mechanism to influence change. Groups can come together online to comment on and influence policy. Individuals from across the globe can now connect in real time to plan activities and events. We have adopted these changes in technology and are working faster to adapt to them.

Community change and collaborative efforts seem to work differently. The pace of these efforts appears to be slower as we build new social

networks and dive more deeply into the complex nature of the issue or problem that we are trying to impact. And yet, the pressure to drive change and impact is significant. The viral adoption of collective impact by funders, community collaboratives, and government is a response to moving both fast and slow together.

If it is true that disruption is a constant in the community change environment, how can we build disruptive leadership capacity within communities to enable them to work both fast and slow? How do we continue to build relationships of trust and engagement within an environment of both quick wins and longer-term impact?

There are lessons to be learned from the private sector, but community change is different. It is relational and adaptive. Community change is often not driven by a single disruptor or change maker, but rather through a series of negotiated strategies and priorities. Working slow allows us to pay attention and build relationships; working fast allows us to identify and leverage high-value opportunities that can deeply disrupt systems. The challenge to leaders in the community change sector is to build their own tool box of skills to work slow and fast and to invest in the development of this skill set in other collaborators. Are you up for this challenge?

ABOUT LIZ WEAVER

Liz is passionate about the power and potential of communities getting to impact on complex issues. Liz currently leads the Tamarack Learning Centre, providing strategic direction for the design and development of learning activities. Previously, Liz led the Vibrant Communities Canada team at Tamarack, assisting place-based poverty reduction tables across Canada to grow their impact. Liz was also the Director of the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, which was recognized with the Canadian Urban Institute's David Crombie Leadership Award in 2009.



ABOUT TAMARACK INSTITUTE

Tamarack is a connected force for change. We believe that when we are effective in strengthening community capacity to engage citizens, lead collaboratively, deepen community, and innovate in place, our collective impact work contributes to building peace and a more equitable society. Learn more at www.tamarackcommunity.ca

Copyright © 2016 by **Tamarack Institute**
tamarackcommunity.ca

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Faisal Hoque, 5 Habits of Truly Disruptive Leaders, Fast Company, November 2015. <https://www.fastcompany.com/3052725/hit-the-ground-running/5-habits-of-truly-disruptive-leaders>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tamarack Institute, <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/collaborativeleadership>