TOOL | TOP 100 PARTNERS EXERCISE

Consider the top 100 people and organizations in your community that could help you realize the change you want to see. Imagine that they were working together to change the community. This would be a dream come true for many communities.

The easiest and least effective way for partnerships to emerge is to just let them happen. I am a huge believer in emergence but, given that partnerships take so much time to develop, I feel it is very important to know who you want your partners to be and to develop a strategy for building these relationships.

My Experience

I spent two days developing an engagement process with a small group that would help their neighbourhood work better together. Their neighbourhood had deteriorated over the past two decades and was known to have large concentrations of low-income housing. We started by talking about the challenges their community faced. Crime, exclusion, lack of hope and poverty were at the top of their list of challenges. After passing half the day focusing on challenges, I helped move the conversation to assets and asked, "What does your neighbourhood have going for it?" We talked about green spaces and a trail network, a community facility and an after school program. We also talked about the resilience of the local residents, a few caring business people, and about a local politician who was so fond of the

neighbourhood that he and his wife would come to just about every event hosted there. We talked about several small restaurant owners that were very vocal and active, a school principal that had endless energy and creativity, and a group of young people that were active through the YMCA. Many stories were shared about acts of kindness and community pride. The challenges seemed less daunting after we began to recognize and understand the people and places that made up this neighbourhood. The conversation turned to the process by which we might bring these people together for a series of conversations. We hoped to come to an agreement on what we could do together to restore the neighbourhood. The group's informal leader asked, "So, who should we invite to such a meeting?" All eyes turned to me. My immediate thought was to say that we should invite the people we had just talked about – the people who we identified as community assets. But, I knew from experience that by inviting these "usual suspects" – the people already engaged in the community – we would miss out on an important opportunity to engage the whole community and to identify who was really needed in order to effect change in the neighbourhood. For the next several hours, I led this small group through an exercise that I have used with dozens of groups. We brainstormed 72 names of people we could engage and then developed a top 20 list for the meeting we would plan to hold. We decided that the other 52 names would be entered into a database and we would track their involvement over the next year. The group believed this was a useful exercise and that, without this disciplined method of identifying key stakeholders, we would have embarked on a process of luck rather than strategy.

Steps to Hold the 100 Partners Exercise

Here is a five-step process that individuals or groups can use to be much more deliberate in building strategic partnerships. This process can help you determine the key people to engage in the system you desire to change.

1. **Brainstorm your partner list**
   Consider the issue you hope to address in your community. On a large piece of paper, write the name of the collaborative you are involved in. Now create four quadrants on the page by dividing the page in half
   both vertically and horizontally creating four quadrants.

   Visualize all of the people in your community who have similar interests, including existing partners. Brainstorm the organizations that make up the system you are hoping to affect by using the following four categories: business, voluntary, government and people affected by the issue. List these in the four quadrants of the page. List all of the organizations (top 100) that make up the system around the issue and place the names into each quadrant. The first 20 are often the easiest, but keep going for as long as you can. If possible, identify the leaders or key members of the organization rather than the name of the organization. Follow the instinct of the group. Do not debate over every individual suggested. Here is an example: If your issue is poverty reduction, consider the people that work for the agencies that serve the poor, such as food banks, low-income neighbourhood centres and homeless shelters. Consider the employers that hire low-income workers, both private and public. Then, consider business associations
   that represent these employers; for example, the local Chamber of Commerce. Also, consider all levels of government that support or fund programs that help the poor. Lastly, identify any citizen organizations that have been developed by the poor for the poor, such as a single parent support group. Keep writing down names until you cannot think of any more.

2. **Rank your List by Sector**
   Sort through your list and identify the people your group knows best and rank the list accordingly. Organize this list into groups by sector. For government, consider dividing names into national, provincial or state and local groups. You may also want to sort by area of activity such as health, social services, service industry, etc.

3. **Rank your List by People**
   Rank lists by identifying the top three people or organizations in each list. I find it helpful to use specific criteria for ranking your top three, where a level one relationship is poor and a level five relationship is strong. This is the method I use:

   - Individuals with whom anyone in your group has a close personal relationship receives five points. Those with lesser relationships receive a lower rating. How do you rate your relationships? If you can ask the person a reasonable favor and if, because of your relationship, they would likely say yes, this is a level five relationship.
   - Next, I rank each person or organization for their ability to contribute to implementing the vision. Again, if they have a lot of influence or resources, this is a level five relationship.
   - Lastly, rank each contact for "readiness to partner." How closely does your idea line up with their thinking? Are they in the midst of a huge change with which your idea fits? If they seem to be

thinking along a different path, their rating may be lower. This is not a scientific formula. Use your gut feeling to rank every person or organization.

4. **Consider Who to Approach First**

   Rank your prospect list by choosing the partners you want to approach first. This stage may require research. The more you know about a potential partner, the easier it is to customize "the ask" in a way that they can easily see the need and benefits of their participation.

   In this step, I suggest looking for two things. The first is a set of names that will give you some quick partnerships, including the people you know well and are sure will join if asked. Second, look for contacts on your list with significant influence. An example of this is the mayor or a leading business person in your city. These are people who bring credibility to the issue and, once they are on your side, it is often much easier to bring on other key community influencers.

5. **Craft the "Ask"**

   Brainstorm how you might make the approach, but proceed with caution. I have one simple rule: Never ask a partner to commit on your first visit. Use the first meeting as an opportunity to introduce your idea and try to leave with a commitment for a second meeting. At the end of the first meeting, ask the potential partner, "Is there other information I can send to you, or questions that I might answer when we get together again?"

This five-step process is not conclusive but, rather, it is a way to be deliberate about relationship building, and to identify the top 100 organizations and individuals that can contribute to the change you want to see in your community. As noted earlier, entering into an effective dialogue with others requires us to be deliberate about how we act and think in such a conversation. When using

dialogue to build our community, the question of "who" should be in the conversation is very important. By recreating the system we hope to affect, we have a much better opportunity to gain a corner on the obvious.

Ideas for the Top 100 Exercise

Here is a five-step process that individuals or groups can use to be much more deliberate in building strategic partnerships. This process can help you determine the key people to engage in the system you desire to change.

- The question of who is a leader often comes up in this process. How do we know this person is a person of influence? I usually ask this question, "Is this a person that if they were to invite 10 of their colleagues to a meeting, seven would show up?" People of influence are the best type of leaders for collaborative process. Position or power do not define leadership for me.

- Do not try to perfect this process. This exercise is a method to brainstorm and sort the names of people and organizations that make up the community system around the issue you want to influence. Do not be overly concerned about which category you place someone in. Be more concerned about capturing the name.

- The key to the Top 100 Exercise is to help the group understand that you desire to be strategic about who they invite into a conversation. Everyone who enters into the conversation is a constituent who has the ability to help implement the group's idea/vision.

Relationship Management

I find it very useful to add all the names that are brainstormed into a database. As your collaboration begins to hold community conversations, ensure you capture the names of everyone who attends. Every event that you hold and every conversation you have about the change you want to see is an opportunity to build a relationship. Acquire email addresses and business cards. These will allow you to keep individuals informed and hopefully get them excited about the work you are doing. After one year, you could have a database full of contacts, complete with information about how they are important and interested in your work, as well as how they have been involved to date.

Gathering and tracking names is important to forming large scale collaborations. In fact, this might be the most important discipline that a collaborative organization can employ. Keeping a relational database creates a system that keeps relationships current and deliberate.This five-step process is not conclusive but, rather, it is a way to be deliberate about relationship building, and to identify the top 100 organizations and individuals that can contribute to the change you want to see in your community. As noted earlier, entering into an effective dialogue with others requires us to be deliberate about how we

What is a relational database?

We all have mailing lists that are organized by various software programs. A relational database can be just that – a listing of names and contact information. What makes it relational is that we have developed categories for each contact so they can be sorted by interest or level of importance to us.

Tips for Building a Relational Database

- Every event held in your community is an important opportunity to build your database. Make sure that you find a way to get the names and email addresses of participants. Consider passing around a sign- up sheet, or find a reason to send some compelling information after the meeting and ask for email addresses before participants leave. If your organization has a newsletter, encourage participants to subscribe.
- Remember, this is a discipline. In other words, building your relational database must be something you do every day and for every event. Even if you already have the contact information, you can acquire more information about a person. Consider setting a goal for your organization's relational database. For example, acquire one thousand names in a year, one event at a time.
- Consider using the database as a way to track engagement. I cannot think of a better way than a relational database to record how many people have been involved in the initiative to date, and their level of interest and contribution. Make sure this is part of your evaluation criteria.
- Consider buying a database that is built specifically for this purpose.
- Use the database! The best way to see the power of the database is to develop a short e-newsletter that provides an engaging update of your work on a regular basis. The Internet plays a role in allowing your collaborative work to grow. It allows for quick, meaningful updates on your work to large groups of people.

Relationships are at the core of every collaboration. They require nurturing and time to build. Being deliberate about who you invite to a conversation is very important. Like hosting a great dinner party, gathering the right people can make the event very special. Taking the time to have a strategic conversation about your top 100 partners can be the most effective time your group has ever spent.