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Let me state it as plainly as I can: I hate the phrase “buy-in.”

It should never, ever be used in the context of doing community work. It is, or should be, an abomination to every person who is trying to genuinely engage people in communities and to every person in a community who is being engaged.

Yeah, I feel strongly about that. My reaction is, frankly, visceral. **So, what is my problem with it?** Let me count the ways.

First, if “buy-in” is necessary, it means that someone else is “selling.” Usually the one who has the most to profit from the “deal” is the seller. And if they must “sell it” to get you to “buy-in” you may not get what you want or expect.

Second, “buy-in” usually means someone already has decided the solution or what is best for me, or you. I have no tolerance for “buy-in.” If anyone tries to get me to “buy-in” to something, I see that as a red-flag and immediately walk away. It tells me they already have something in mind and do not really want me to participate in any meaningful way. They just want me to say “Yes” and accept what they are selling. That is just how I roll with this.

Third, to “buy-in” is purely transactional, not transformational. We “buy-in” to something because we are expecting something in return, however, when the terms of the transaction changes (e.g., funding ends, no further perceived benefit to us, etc.) then the deal is done. The “seller” looks for the next product and a new “buyer” for it.

Finally, “buy-in” is change on the cheap. “Cheap” does not only mean inexpensive, it means poor quality. In this case, it

means the change only lasts for as long as the exchange of something for something (“quid pro quo”) continues. Yes, this sounds a lot like my second objection but there is an important additional difference. “Cheap” change can also do lasting damage. Sometimes the damage is not immediate and acute, but accumulative and nagging. Let me give you an example of how “buy-in” can do damage.

In 2016, during the Obama Administration, I was honored to be invited to a meeting at the White House. It was a meeting of Promise Zone leaders throughout the United States with their research partners from major universities. The Promise Zone initiative emerged during President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address in which he laid out a plan to help high poverty urban, rural, and tribal communities.

Promise Zones are geographic areas where the federal government partners with local leaders to do work to lift the community out of poverty. Efforts may include increased economic activity, better educational opportunities, encouraging private investment, reducing crime (particularly violent crime), increase the overall health of the community, and address other community priorities.

One of the meetings I attended that day was of researchers who were discussing the challenges of conducting research in communities within Promise Zones. Several lamented the challenge of getting community people to “buy-in” to their research and cooperate with them. Others, though, were passionately arguing that people, particularly those in communities of high poverty, were tired of helping with research and had been let down too many times. They had helped in the past, hoping their effort would result in a change in their community and lives, but they no longer trusted their “buy-in” would make a difference.

The damage? Everyone loses. People in high poverty communities may miss out on that one opportunity that does make a difference. Researcher and other stakeholders may miss out on learning how to really make a difference in those communities.

When people “buy-in” to change efforts today, they already know it is transactional – even if they do not use that word to describe it. By experience they have come to understand it will probably benefit the “seller” more than them, it will be temporary, and it probably will not be high quality.

I could rail on the concept of “buy-in” all day because I am so disgusted hearing it used in community and organizational change work. However, that would only make me feel better and do nothing to move the conversation forward. So, let me offer three ideas which are a better way: **meaningful participation, co-creation, and ownership.**

Meaningful Participation

Participation can mean many things. It can mean:

- no more than just having your name on a list of stakeholders and partners,
- showing up at occasional meetings but hanging back because you have not kept up on what is going on during your absences,
- attending only those meetings where “big” or controversial decisions are being considered,
- being present but remaining silent because you do not feel confident speaking up,
- attending with the intention of contributing but not understanding the business procedure well enough to know how to contribute,
- attending every meeting with the hope of being asked for your ideas and suggestions, but, in the end, never being asked, and
- attending, trying to contribute to the meeting, and being ignored or blocked

These are forms of participation, but none qualify as meaningful participation.

Meaningful participation means each person has the equal and equitable opportunity to:

- Hear and understand the same information as everyone else
- Give voice to their opinions, ideas, and suggestions with the expectation they will be heard and considered
- Participate in the decisions that need to be made, including those that most directly impact them

Those of who work with organizations and communities have a responsibility to do everything we can to provide meaningful participation to every member who wishes to be

a part of the change effort. Yes, it can get messy when a lot of people show up to work and it can take longer to do the work. However, providing the opportunity of meaningful participation to people is the right thing to do if we want to create genuine change.

Many of us have a “default” setting we must override when we do community work. The “default” says we go first and foremost to “experts” for their help in the community. Unfortunately, we have a limited view of who the “experts” are. Our default setting causes us to look only to experts such as the formal leaders, providers, professionals, researchers, public officials, funders, and the like.

What we miss are the other community “experts” – those whose expertise is based in their lived experience with the conditions, issue, situation, or problem we are trying to change.

Years ago, while attending a Tamarack Institute conference in Canada, I hear these two types of experts described as “content experts” for the first group and “context experts” for the second. One of my clients has used a different term to describe them. The first are “experts by learned experience” and the second are “experts by lived experience.”

The key word in either framing is “experts.” We make a significant mistake when we fail to see the full range of expertise in the communities and organizations we are trying to change. Even worse is when we bias meaningful participation to “experts with learned experience,” the “content experts.” If we want to double our expertise in the work we are doing at the community or organization level, we need to at least double meaningful participation from “experts with lived experience.”

Co-Creation

The purpose of meaningful participation is co-creation. Simply put, co-creation is collaborative innovation. Ideas are generated together, shared among one another, tested, and improved upon. You may be familiar with the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle. It is one approach to co-creation.

Before communities and organizations can co-create, they need to engage with all the expertise in the community – lived and learned, context and content. However, the act of co-creation suggests the engagement is not merely for the purpose of consulting the experts. Co-creation requires all these experts to be brought together, whether via video conference or in person, to work together.

Together they need to define the problems they are trying to address. Together they need to identify the range of possible solutions. Together they need to consider all they have learned together and all their resources to affirm common purpose and direction they need, want, and are willing to embrace.

There are a myriad of co-creation techniques and approaches available to organizations and communities. What is critical to each and all is the willingness for communities and organizations to bring all their experts together to collaborate.

Collaboration is more than just getting people together. It has numerous challenges – building trust and respect, are just two. Another is that context experts (by lived experience) do not always know how to engage with content experts (by learned experience), and vice versa. When we try to bring them together, we must be prepared to train them how to engage positively and productively with the other.

When we do bring them together, we need to make sure all experts have an experience of meaningful participation.

Ownership

For those who like formulas, here is one:

Meaningful Participation + Co-Creation = Ownership

Rather than create “buy-in” to community and organizational change, our goal is to create ownership of that change.

Ownership means that members feel they have “skin in the game,” which is to say they have intentionally been involved in bringing about the change that is or has emerged.

When people feel ownership of the change, they take pride in it, they take credit for it, and they do everything they can to protect from “snapping back” to the way things were before. “Buy-in” does not produce that same intensity of feeling and commitment.

Here is the deal. I have absolutely no tolerance for anyone who tries to get me to “buy-in” to something. I also have extremely little tolerance for people who view gaining community or organizational “buy-in” as a high goal. I have only limited tolerance for people who use the “buy-in” phrase and around without understanding its implications.

Community and organizational change are slow processes because we do not want people to simply “buy-in.” We want all members of the community or organization to experience meaningful participation, work together to co-create solutions, and develop a deep sense of ownership in the change. Anything less, when we are doing community and organizational work with integrity, should be unacceptable.

Yeah, I am a little legalistic about this. And a bit inflexible. **It is, after all, a core value that informs my work with organizations and communities.** A few years back I heard my colleagues in Canada use the phrase “nothing about us without us” when describing a mindset that values meaningful participation, co-creation, and ownership. I like it. It speaks my mind, too.

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