OUR COMMUNITY CAN CHANGE | WHEN WE WORK TOGETHER WELL

PAUL BORN

THE PROMISE:

GIVE PEOPLE GOOD INFORMATION AND EFFECTIVE TOOLS, AND THEY WILL ORGANIZE AND WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE THE KIND OF COMMUNITIES THEY WANT.

The first time I met author Margaret Wheatley, she said something that stayed with me. She said (or at least this is how I heard it): "Do not worry about organizing people … when people are engaged, they will organize as they need to."

Her book *Leadership and the New Science* inspired me when I began thinking about systems change. It also helped me to look at leadership not just as an individual act, but also as something people do together.

As people act toward a common agenda, they bring a collective leadership to bear upon the issue. What I find amazing is that in the act of working collaboratively, we can observe leadership happening on two levels. *Individual leadership* takes the form of contributions such as sharing a personal vision, listening, analyzing the facts, giving direction, and being bold. *Collective leadership* takes the form of work that happens between people, including conversing, engaging, agreeing, collaborating, deepening relationships, and acting together. As I observe collective action, I see people bringing to life the principle that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Aristotle).

For the past 15 years, I have had the privilege of working at the Tamarack Institute, where we observe, document, and teach collective action to individuals and communities seeking to improve their social and economic conditions. We have landed on five core ideas to explain and teach this community change.

Collective Impact is the **most powerful** set of ideas as it provides a group of actions, including building a common agenda and a shared measurement system, to make it easier to work together and to strengthen mutually reinforcing activities between community partners. Continuous communication keeps the partners aligned and builds momentum, while a backbone governance and staffing model provide an agreed-upon structure for action as well as dedicated professionals to support its implementation.

Community Engagement is the **most important** as it recognizes that for large-scale change to occur, we need to engage a large number of people who believe in the cause and are willing to act. We have observed that when people have good information, are consulted about the desired change, and have an opportunity to be involved in the change process, they become committed to the work at hand and actively participate. This is critical because sustainable community change requires everyone in a community to be engaged, not just the traditional leaders and organizations associated with the issue

Community Innovation is the **most critical**, as to be content with how things are now is to assume that if we just work harder, smarter, or invest more money in the current way of doing things, we can get a different result. Change at the community level requires us to rethink current systems of program delivery. It requires us to come up with new ideas. This can happen when we engage people with lived experience in an issue (e.g., when someone living in poverty gets involved in a campaign to end homelessness). They are able to provide critical insights into their needs, helping to foster a culture of new or renewed thinking.

Collaborative Leadership is the **most personal** as it requires people involved in the change process to consider how they show up in the work. I often express collaborative leadership in this way: "I am a leader, we are all leaders, there is work to do, let's get on with it." This provides a framework for building collective action. First, we recognize that leadership is individual—that when people are engaged, they start to take ownership of the change required and take individual action. Second, when people are collectively engaged, they join forces to create a joint action in order to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Evaluating Community Change is the **most essential** as it recognizes that change cannot scale unless we can understand the outcomes. A shared measurement system requires us to understand not only what we want to change, but how we might be able to measure the change as real and tangible at the population level. At Tamarack, when we track community change we most often consider three levels of outcomes. First, we want to know how many individuals and families have experienced an improvement in their lives as a result of the programs that have been put into place. Second, we want to track a community's potential by understanding and documenting how its capacity for change is improving. This involves tracking outcomes such as a growing cross-sector collaboration, strengthened engagement with people of lived experience, or a more exact and broadly held understanding of the issue. Third, we want to track "policy" shifts (large-scale sustainable change) and the changes in approach to the issue either on an organizational level (i.e., a business improves hiring practices to reduce poverty) or on a community-wide level (i.e., the city institutes a lower bus pass fare for low-income people).

Though we most often discuss or teach these five ideas separately, we are increasingly seeking to understand **all five as critical elements in any community change process**. Can collective impact really work, if we do not have deep and broad engagement? Can we embrace change by working collaboratively, if we do not change how we understand leadership? Shared measurement might help us set goals, but does it take into account a more comprehensive understanding of how complex change can be?

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The innovation that is part of genuine large-scale change requires us to hold all five of the above ideas in tandem. In so doing, we increase our likelihood of making a large-scale collective impact. Like the five fingers on a hand, each idea offers something of critical importance, but when all five fingers work together the work is easier and more effective.

MARCY'S STORY

Marcy is an amazing community developer from a small city in Alberta. A social worker by training, she has done multiple jobs, including front-line service, over the course of her 20-year career. She is currently an upper-mid-level manager working for her city government and is active in her provincial community developers' association. She has long

desired a better quality of life for low-income citizens, and has worked to end homelessness and provide improved housing for Aboriginal people and new Canadians in her community. Creating a more equitable community is her passion.

But Marcy had become increasingly concerned that no matter how many great programs her city provided, the population-level statistics for vulnerable people didn't seem to change for the better. Low-income families tended to remain poor, and those who moved out of poverty were quickly replaced by others.

I first met Marcy when she attended our five-day Communities Collaborating workshop in Calgary. Marcy was ever positive … but tired. She was deeply committed to her work, and now, in mid-career, she wanted to see bigger results. She was tired of partnering with other agencies in her community only to see that after huge amounts of work, nothing ever really seemed to change.

What Marcy desired was a system that would take collaboration to a higher level and truly achieve a bigger impact in her community. I remember that she became very curious as she participated in the workshop I was delivering, called "Collective Impact – The First 12 Months." It started as I described a deliberate process for engaging people with lived experience. I remember seeing her sit back in her chair and ponder how her own community could do this. Later, when she was in a peer-to-peer learning circle, I saw her describing what she had learned. Her energy was returning.

Marcy attended other workshops over the next several years. She participated in webinars, communities of practice, and multi-day workshops on community engagement and impact evaluation. She took her learning back to her community. She also brought community partners, low-income citizen leaders, and even business leaders to our events.

She had changed, and in turn, her community was developing new ideas and implementing new programs.

THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

In an interview with Marcy two years after I had first met her, she shared this observation.

Paul, what I was looking for was a simple understanding that would help the collaborative action of our community to be more effective. I first saw a lot of hope in the idea of Collective Impact – it was simple to explain and as I shared the amazing papers written by FSG and Tamarack about it with community partners, we all became excited by this fresh approach to community change. I kept remembering what you had said. Collective Impact sounds familiar because it is really just a highly evolved understanding of collaborative action, though the role of the backbone organization and the potential of shared measurement were highly motivating.

I quickly realized, though, that in order for our community to make lasting change, we needed to get really good at bringing the whole community into this work, including people with lived experience and the business community. My growing understanding of community engagement became critical to our work. Then, as I started to work with people who were not social workers or community development specialists, my understanding of leadership needed to shift and my understanding of community roles in collaborative change became broader.

Most importantly, things really shifted for me when I took the workshop Evaluating Community Impact because it really brought the idea of shared measurement into focus for me. When we started tracking outcomes effectively and shared real data in our community and discussed it with organizations, we could clearly show our desired results and in turn were able to focus the work of our partners. This truly changed how our collaborative evolved.

Marcy had changed. Not only did she become more motivated and skilled at collaborative collective impact work, her understanding of the work became much more comprehensive and focused.

THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY CHANGE

In my workshops, I often talk about "your collaborative understanding of change." In simplest terms, your team answers the question, "How do you think change will occur?" Typically, I ask collaboratives to consider four questions when building their understanding of change:

1. **Who are we now**? What is the work we do and why do we do it? This helps us explain ourselves, and begs the question – if we are doing the work we are doing, what does this say about our theory of change? If we are delivering many programs that are specific to helping individuals live better lives, but no programs that are focused on community development and creating better living conditions in neighbourhoods, then our theory of change might be that "change occurs when people have the personal skills and resources to take control of their lives." We may recognize that healthy neighbourhoods do improve lives, but the absence of initiatives to improve neighborhoods in our community would suggest otherwise.

2. **What is the change we want to see**? This is a collective vision and often supports a collaborative to think more comprehensively about the kind of community it wants. By thinking in these terms, we automatically express a broader understanding of the change needed.

3. **How do we think that change will occur**? This is, of course, the critical question in theory of change work. When we analyze what we are currently doing and compare it with the change we want to see, we can see the gaps in our thinking more clearly. We can then ask how we might realize a more comprehensive vision for a great community, one in which there is equity and we live sustainably. The broader discussion is, then, to consider how we might get there. What is our thinking system? What kind of leadership do we require? How do we work together to make this happen? Answering these questions might broaden our theory of change to: "We all have a role to play in building a better community. When many leaders and everyday citizens work together, more can happen than any when one organization strives to be the best that it can be."

4. **What then will we do, and how is this consistent with how we believe change is going to occur**? The action steps needed for change must be consistent with the theory of change. If we believe in collaborative action, then we need to organize collaboratively. If we believe everyone has a role to play, then we must create roles for everyone. If we broaden our understanding of change to include community development and policy change, then we must build these into our plan.

WORKING TOGETHER

When people understand what they want to change and have a strong understanding that a collaborative, community-wide campaign is the only way change will occur, they long for a process that will involve everyone in their city to become engaged and join them in creating the kind of place they want. This is a time to build community momentum.

The first 12 months of a collaborative campaign are critical in how the work is positioned. These months are also the most important time for building broad commitment. It is a time for engaging people, not for "selling" our idea.

The "we need a strategic plan" instinct is very strong among community and business leaders, and even though people want to create a comprehensive plan that engages the community, their focus on establishing strategic priorities and action steps dominates their thinking. There seems to be an urgency for action.

Henry Mintzberg, one of Canada's top business academics, shares with us in his Harvard-published paper "The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning" why traditional planning can trump strategic thinking. The idea of planning is to engage everyone who will eventually need to implement a strategy. People

need to internalize the common vision, and when they do, the strategic priorities and action steps jointly developed are owned by the people who will implement them.

My strongest recommendation to anyone who wants to implement a large-scale community change process is to take the time to really engage your community. The way to do this is to involve people from all walks of life in cross-sector dialogues and "planning experiences" so that they receive compelling information, are well consulted, and have the opportunity to share how they want to be involved. This needs to be a transparent process. Your only "to do" is to listen and to embrace whatever arises.

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If instead you choose to first develop your vision, strategic directions, and action steps with a small group – and then take this plan "to the people" to get their input, feedback, and ultimately buy-in – my experience is that people will be cynical at best and hostile at worst. Why? When you bring "your ideas" to people and ask them to respond, they feel as though they are being asked to rubber-stamp decisions that have already been made. You have not evoked their creativity or sense of possibility – rather, you have relied on perceived experts to tell people what to do. The world has changed. People want to be engaged, not sold on an idea. If they own the idea, they will help make it real.

5 STEPS TO CHANGE (A ONE-ACT PLAY)

During my workshop "Collective Impact: The First 12 Months," I share with the audience the key deliverables that can be achieved in the first year together as a collaboration. I start the workshop by describing a conversation you may have had with your President or Board Chair.

You: We have for some time discussed the need for a large-scale community campaign to reduce cancer rates in our state.

Board Chair: Yes, you have excited us with ideas about collective impact and have been working with our community to create the key conditions for success.

You: We are ready to launch and have a solid group of leaders who want to collaborate. They represent business, government, and the community. We have also engaged a good representation of people with lived experience. Several funders have expressed interest, and we have assessed that there is a strong sense of urgency in our community around this issue.

Board Chair: Wonderful! Can you help me understand what we will actually do in the first year? I understand the macro goals and the key elements of collective impact. What I am less clear about is what do we actually do to build momentum and ultimately get results.

You: I know at times it feels like we are very emergent around community change. This is intentional as there are some big shifts we require in our community to move from "incremental change" thinking to "transformational change" thinking. We need to catalyze collective leadership and help people work differently, by:

- Understanding the greater system and the complexity of which they are a part.
- Fostering a different, deeper type of dialogue that leads to greater clarity, understanding of difference, and innovation.
- Shifting our collective focus from reactive problem-solving to co-creating the future.

Ultimately, we require five shifts in perspective throughout our community, moving people from

deficit-based thinking to asset-based thinking, building trust, and helping leaders put relationships at the centre. In addition, we need to make data much more inclusive so people really understand what is going on. By working in an emergent fashion, we are able to better understand and gauge the energy within our community for this issue. We can also shift emphasis if needed, and detect any possible blind spots in our thinking.

Board Chair: Absolutely, a cultural shift is required. Things cannot remain status quo.

You: But you are interested in our deliverables. Here is a summary.

- **First**, we will develop an engagement strategy with the goal of engaging at least 1,000 people in dialogue about their experience of cancer, and seeking their input into how we can reduce the incidence and mortality rate of this disease. We will use best-practice community engagement techniques to achieve this. We are forming a "listening team" to implement this strategy.

- **Second**, we are developing a data team that will gather all the sources of information that organizations are currently using to make decisions. We will identify any information gaps that need to be filled. We will use this data in our engagement strategy to foster awareness and generate ideas for change.

- **Third**, we will write a community plan. But we are making a commitment to the community that we will not write the plan within the first 12 months. We want to assure people that we have truly taken the time to engage, inform, consult, and involve them. Our plan clearly lays out a governance model (backbone role) for how we will implement the plan over the next five years.

- **Fourth**, we are building a database of people who are engaged and interested in getting involved in this campaign. We will also work strategically to encourage agencies and business to participate and ultimately sign on to implementing the community plan. By having upwards of 100 partner organizations, we will be able to form a true common agenda.

- **Finally**, we want to work with funders to have them commit to the plan by bringing their clout, expertise, and money.

Board Chair: That is an ambitious work plan, though very concrete. I think we are ready to take this to the board.

THE FUTURE OF YOUR COMMUNITY

There are days when it is hard to be hopeful. As we see news of environmental change and we listen to politicians who spread hate and division, our hearts sink. Organizations can become entrenched and people fearful. The positive change we long for can so easily dissipate.

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I ask that you have courage and to take the time to see past the challenges and look into the hearts and ambitions of the people who live around you. I have met and worked with thousands of people to build better cities and communities, and I have found we all have three things in common. We want to live in a safe and nurturing place, we want opportunity for ourselves and our children, and we want to live in an equitable, democratic world. My experience is

that even if people have vastly different political approaches, faith-based beliefs, or cultural understandings, we are far more the same than we are different. I have come to see that we don't all need to believe in the same things to work well together in building a great city. We just need to care about the same things – and around the fundamentals, we do.

What we need is the opportunity to meet each other, to have a conversation from the heart, and to embrace each other's stories. Never fear people's desire to organize, says Margaret Wheatley: "They always will." The real issue is: will they organize against one another or with each other? I believe that if we can equip people with the solid principles and practices of collective impact and community engagement, they will organize with each other. They will find space for their ideas and bring their best to the common table.

Community change *is* possible.

ABOUT PAUL BORN

Paul Born is the cofounder and President of Tamarack Institute, a global leader on issues of place, collective impact, and community innovation. The author of four books, Paul is internationally recognized for his community-building activities that have won awards from the United Nations and as a senior fellow of Ashoka, the world's largest network of social innovators.

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.

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