

Breakthrough Community Change by Paul Born – pauldborn@gmail.com

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Introduction: Whole Community Change

Our world is facing pressing and relentless problems. Climate change, poverty, disease, racism, and inequality are jeopardizing the lives and well-being of all citizens. We need meaningful breakthroughs to create large-scale, community-wide change. Incremental change will not provide the momentum needed to tackle these unyielding challenges. It is most important for us to work as a united force to innovate, cooperate, and collaborate if we are to achieve the breakthroughs needed to redress and make significant progress to improve the quality of life for all.

Cities, towns, municipalities, neighborhoods, and communities are in a unique position to prioritize innovative approaches to achieve large-scale impact through breakthrough community change. These groups can act at a manageable scale to collaborate at a magnitude that can result in noteworthy changes within a defined geographic area. They can maximize breakthrough community change approaches to transform the root causes of social problems in their communities. As business, government, non-profits, and people with lived/living experience gather to network and learn from each other, new and creative ideas emerge and the momentum for change is fueled. This intense collaboration results in some of the most profound social changes including ending poverty, reducing cancer rates, and becoming carbon neutral. In the end, the community is a better and more vibrant place for all.

Breakthrough community change recognizes that we can do more together when we unite than any of us can do alone. By working toward a common agenda and with a common approach we bring the unique skills and assets of each individual into the process of change. When we become an interconnected force, large-scale breakthrough community change is possible.

I believe that many of the social issues, and the brokenness we see and feel in our communities are felt by most of us. We see many different people struggle including single parents, alienated

families, young people, and many dealing with mental health issues. We see the effects of climate change, poverty, and racism on our neighbors. We are somehow frozen. Frozen together like ice cubes that melted just enough to touch each other before they froze again. We want to act, but we are stuck. Or maybe we are just waiting for a sign or an opportunity to act. And yet, so often we wait, and nothing changes.

The world needs our discontent with the ways things are. If we were content, we would accept the brokenness we see daily in our communities. We would accept the fear our children have of their future and climate change. We would accept the misery of the homeless mother struggling to care for her children and the fractious and seemingly futile struggle of people faced with racism and the inequity it breeds. We would accept the hunger pains that are never satisfied with the workers that earn less than they need. Our discontent leads us and the organizations we work within to seek breakthroughs.

Many of us have experienced breakthroughs that have changed our lives. We have had flashes of pure clarity and “aha” moments that seem to transform old ways of thinking, reinvigorate energies, and lead us to a new, more innovative way of living. Throughout this book, you will read stories about the breakthroughs of many individuals I have coached and mentored along their journey to engage an entire community to create a large-scale impact. The stories I share will illustrate how the power of personal and organizational breakthroughs can be harnessed at the community level to increase engagement, identify assets, and work collaboratively to build a common agenda and work toward whole community change.

Many of us have been part of a team or group working in a community that has experienced a breakthrough. Community teams or groups usually have common goals and strive to work together to achieve an agreed-upon outcome. The best teams know how to engage creatively, challenge mindsets and discover innovative ways of working together. This is the journey toward a community breakthrough.

Breakthrough Community Change: A Guide to Creating Common Agendas That Change

Everything illustrates the process of communities collaborating to achieve large-scale change and makes the approaches, ideas, techniques, and skills available to a growing field of changemakers.

This book presents a practical approach that can inspire community leaders and social service providers to consider solving the root causes of problems rather than simply addressing their symptoms or alleviating their effects.

Part I of this book will lead you through a process of identifying your community's readiness for change, forming Leadership, Action, and Strategy Teams, creating a common agenda, and establishing plans for community engagement, internal and external communication, shared measurement, and governance. These efforts lead to the implementation of a community campaign that can result in large-scale community change.

Part I provides a roadmap to breakthrough community change. Essential to this journey is a common agenda. A common agenda is a result of building trust in new ways and forging a shared community commitment to the needed change. When people are committed to change, they bring forth individual and organizational assets that are contributed to collective action. The process of developing a common agenda results in people being engaged, curious, and innovative. New creativity can be unleashed as people release old mental models and embrace collective ones. The process of building a common agenda unites a community and increases bonding across multiple sectors. A common agenda is the door that opens to breakthrough community change.

Critical to the journey toward impact is asking broader questions, measuring, and observing interventions and effects for the change we want to see. Listening to people with lived experience, learning quickly, and adapting are critical to moving toward a strong impact. Progress should be tracked using a contribution mindset, rather than an attribution measurement approach. The evaluation process should be designed and carried out in ways that empower stakeholders and are organized around their questions.

Part II of this book provides more detailed descriptions of the approaches and skill sets (ideas and strategies) that can help you to develop the muscles needed to do the work described in Part I. The most effective community changemakers have an evolving awareness of knowledge of theories and concepts around how communities function, how policies are developed, and how people are engaged in the process of change. Most importantly, they are interested in how communities collaborate and authentically work together to achieve better outcomes. Effective community collaboration is complex and draws from the study of collective impact, asset-based community development, community engagement, social innovation, collaborative leadership, and participatory evaluation.

As founder and former CEO of the Tamarack Institute, I have worked with hundreds of communities as they worked through this process and made significant impacts on their community. One community of over 100,000 people I coached reduced decades of deeply entrenched poverty from 28% of the population down to 12%. I have seen the ideas shared in this book contribute tremendously to large-scale change in communities. These changes transform the root causes of social problems and result in large-scale population-level impact. To achieve a population-level impact we must recognize that the issues facing the community are radically interconnected. The deeper we understand and experience connections between each other and within the community, the more we will be able to uncover hidden resources and innovative ideas. When we unite within a network of committed individuals and agree on a common agenda for change, we move closer toward comprehensive transformation and resolution of social and economic challenges.

The goal of the Tamarack Institute is to better understand community change and make the work of community change leaders easier and more effective. The Institute works in Canada, the United States, and worldwide to advance communities collaborating for population-level change. The Institute's 42,000 active learners are leaders in the processes of large-scale community change. This book is about sharing what we learned along the way and making the knowledge,

processes, and strategies more accessible to a broader audience.

This journey started when my colleagues and I launched Opportunities 2000, a four-year campaign in the Waterloo Region of Canada with the goal of reducing poverty in our community to the lowest level in the country by the year 2000. As the work intensified, word spread quickly as positive changes were realized and supported by strong outcome data. By 2022 nearly 500 communities in Canada and the United States joined together as a learning community called Vibrant Communities. These communities create common agendas and use the Breakthrough Community Change ideas and practices described in this book to end poverty, secure youth futures, support climate transition and deepen a sense of community. With more than 1 million people out of poverty, almost all the communities in the Vibrant Communities network have seen significant drops in poverty at the population level and improvements in the quality of life for all residents. Canada has reduced poverty dramatically. The 2000 poverty rate in Canada was 16.2%. Since the creation of Vibrant Communities, Statistics Canada reports the poverty rate has dropped to 6.4% in 2020, the lowest level of poverty in Canada's history.

Collaborative community change is fueling worldwide change. Tamarack's Vibrant Communities uses the collaborative ideas and practices of Breakthrough Community Change shared in this book with multiple campaigns in Canada, United States, and around the world. Communities Building Youth Futures is using the strategies to identify their goal of improving high school graduation rates and youth engagement. Community Climate Transitions has taken on the task of combating climate change. Cities Deepening Community uses these strategies to strengthen citizenship and advance neighborliness. More examples of the effectiveness of the integration of multiple ideas on community change are described throughout the book.

Like you, when I read the newspaper or scroll on social media, I am struck by how many reports detail significant problems in my neighborhood, country, and around the world. At times I feel like I am being bombarded with such massive and complex problems that I am paralyzed with despair. As a community organizer for many years, I know well how easy it is to be

overwhelmed by issues of recession, poverty, loneliness, youth mental illness, climate crises, rising rates of disease and so many other social problems. Yet I know that I cannot be still. I cannot be silent. I must use my knowledge, experience, and energies to champion changes that will build better, stronger, and healthier lives for people in our communities around the world.