



CREATING THE CULTURE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT | HOW FEAR MAY BE HOLDING US BACK FROM AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

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It shows up everywhere and yet it is often invisible. It's time we take an honest look at fear, understand the power it has over us and figure out how to transform it to fuel deeper engagement.

Over the last two years during workshops, surveys, and small group interviews, I have spoken with practitioners about their community engagement practices and asked—what do you think is holding you and your organization back from engaging the way you want? The most common barrier named was fear.

This does not pertain to everyone: there are people for whom fear of engaging is a non-issue. Many embrace the activities of engaging their communities with excitement, with curiosity, with freedom. This stance is amazing: it's productive, it equalizes power, and it clears the path for innovation.

Yet, many people tasked with engaging a community face an uphill battle. It may be a battle with their organizational culture, when working with certain teams or groups, with formal structures, or with themselves as they move out of their comfort zone to do things differently from the way they have always been done.

FEAR? OF WHAT?

In the small group interviews I conducted, fear shows up in all stages of a typical engagement process: fear of reaching out to the public at all; of being verbally attacked; of being the front-person representing a whole organization and not having all the information or answers; risk of creating additional awareness to a problem; fear of the community wanting something you can't deliver; fear of disappointing people; fear of not being able to follow through.

For a short overview of the basics of community engagement, listen to the TenFold podcast episode – [1. Let's Talk Community Engagement](#), featuring Lisa Attygalle.

For many people fear is often closely bundled up with a desire not to harm the community. We do not want to get into conflict, offend people, or retraumatize, so we avoid altogether—which may also cause harm in the process.

As I speak to practitioners who experience fear, mitigating risk is a consuming thought as they approach engaging their communities. Sometimes the fear is named outright, sometimes it is not, but it is apparent in their behaviors. It shows itself as a hesitancy, an uncertainty, desire to self-preserve and to not be vulnerable.

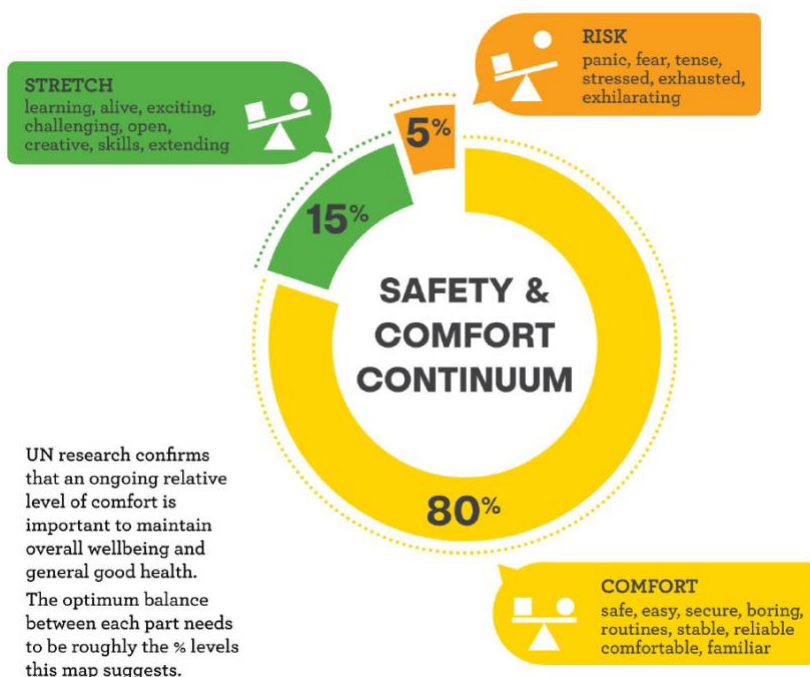
I want to validate these fears. They likely come from a well-intentioned but cautious place. Community engagement practitioners have a tough job and often find themselves in the middle of sensitive relationships and contentious issues. I believe, however, that if we want to do right by the community we need to confront our fear and not let it hold us back. The benefits of engaging well are worth it.

MAKING FEAR PRODUCTIVE

UN research into safety and comfort identifies the relative thresholds between feelings of comfort, risk, and being stretched, to maintain a state of wellbeing. Feeling risk—often expressed as panic and fear—is biologically a good thing and historically a helpful response to threats.

When it comes to community engagement practices, the challenge, and path forward from fear, is firstly to acknowledge the fear and know that it’s ok to feel this way, and then to take steps to get comfortable with fear and associate these activities as stretch opportunities instead—where we feel challenged but in a way where we can learn and extend our skills.

Our question then is: What are the ways to convert challenging community engagement scenarios where practitioners are commonly held back by fear, into stretch opportunities that allow all parties to come together and learn? In the world of community engagement, what kind of culture is needed to make it easier to step out and take risks?



Safety & Comfort Continuum – Inspiring Communities

STRATEGIES FOR MOVING THROUGH FEAR

People rarely express their fear of engaging publicly. Instead it is shared over lunch with friends or in a workshop far removed from their community. I hear similar challenges so frequently that I know these concerns are worth addressing, so I am approaching this paper like we're on a coaching call: I'll name the reactions, comments, and behaviours I hear from community engagement practitioners, and then respond with recommended strategies.

While this approach is a bit unconventional for a paper, I feel it's important to keep these fear-based reactions personal, in the hopes that they remain relatable and the advice tangible. These recommendations aren't meant to be prescriptive, but rather inspire you to work through what might be a good next step in your situation. All of these scenarios are general in nature and do not represent a single individual or organization.

SCENARIO | PRETENDING TO ENGAGE

Imagine you're in this situation:

A lot of research has already been done and it points to a clear solution. You don't want to belittle the experts by saying the community knows best.

You've been in a similar situation before where you've engaged the community and presented the insights to the project team, but no one really paid much attention to them. You aren't even really convinced the feedback is representative anyway, so you don't want to advocate for the community's perspective too much.

As you're organizing a town hall, you put your invite out on Facebook and a notice in the paper, and a part of you hopes that people don't really care and the event flies under the radar. Your agenda includes three presentations from your content experts and then 20 minutes for community Q&A. You feel a sense of relief when only three questions are asked and two of them are off-topic.

In general, it feels like you're going through the motions. You know the engagement could be done better but you're hesitant to push the team/departments/organization to reimagine how community engagement could be done. You're not sure whether you should step forward and try to lead the work in a more intentional way.

STRATEGY 1: AGREE ON THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY

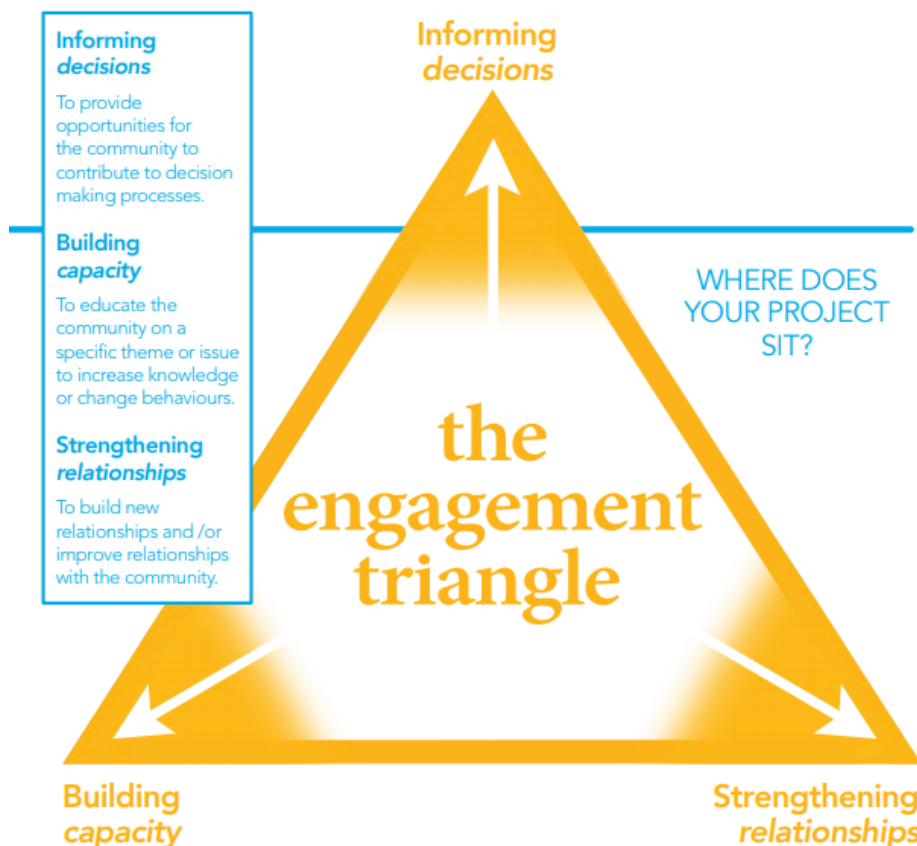
It's important to have a shared understanding of the role that the community has in the work. Firstly, what is your relationship with the community for this specific work—are you doing something 'to' the community (without their input), 'for' the community (with consultation), or 'with' the community involved or partnering with you?

If it is decided that, yes, you need a relationship with the community for this work, you then need to figure out what the relationship should be. One of my favourite tools for this is The Engagement Triangle (Capire Consulting Group, 2016). Ask your team the following questions:

1. Should the community have any sort of input or influence into the outcomes of this work?
2. Do we need to share information or educate the community about any part of this work?
Are we wanting to build skills or change behaviours?
3. Are you looking to build or improve relationships with community members?

Your answers to these questions will show where on the Engagement Triangle your work sits and will spell out the intent of your community engagement work. It will also inform your engagement methods, for example, holding a focus group vs. community-wide online survey vs. creating an educational video. (Use [The Engagement Triangle booklet](#) to see this process and suggested methods.) Once you have defined the role of the community, there is then a through-line from your goals to your methods to how you're evaluating your work. You can use the [Community Engagement Planning Canvas](#) to map these through-lines.

I find that when practitioners jump straight to selecting methods rather than starting by determining why they're engaging, and then default to the engagement methods that are easy or quick or that they are comfortable with, the outcomes are less meaningful and easier to gloss over. If you have defined your intent it becomes much harder to just go through the motions.



The Engagement Triangle – Capire Consulting Group

STRATEGY 2: FIGURE OUT WHAT IS STILL ON THE TABLE

All too often organizations consult the community around topics that have pretty much been decided (formally or informally). This is a frustrating process for everyone involved: it is disrespectful to the community and it is a waste of resources. If you are in the situation where a lot of decisions have been made, your job is then to 1) educate the community on those decisions and why they were made, and 2) if you're still seeking community input, figure out what is still on the table and consult around those decisions instead.

For example: “This is the technology we need to use for reason X and Y, but we want your thoughts on where it should be implemented, what style of training should be made available, and if they have any suggestions for how the technology is named.”

The key here is to be transparent. Transparency builds trust.

If the community can no longer play a role in informing decisions, look to the other corners of the engagement triangle. How can you build relationships to ensure a successful implementation? Should you build community capacity around the work or its implications through awareness, education or training?

STRATEGY 3: EXPLORE YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL MINDSET TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The common overarching organizational mindsets that I see regarding community engagement are:

1. Viewing community engagement as a supplemental activity; a nice-to-have;
2. Desiring for community engagement to be a core function but feeling restrained by lack of resources; a like-to-have;
3. Integrating community engagement so that it is how the work gets done; a must-have.

If you're struggling to engage the way you'd like to, your organization likely falls into the first two categories. So how can you lead from within?

Rather than trying to budge structures and systems, try starting by getting buy-in to pilot a single project. It's more compelling to show the benefits of deeper engagement than it is to just talk about them. If you feel held back by your organization holding control, pilot a small-scale project where the community plays a role in decision-making (eg. [Participatory budgeting](#), deliberative processes like [citizens juries](#)). Take baby steps—rather than committing to implement what the community decides, commit to working with the community to reach consensus and put forward a community-vetted recommendation.

Practice trusting the community. In our experience communities are more understanding of complexity than we give them credit for, and more willing to shift perspectives when invited into these processes. Research also shows that decisions made by many people together are more likely to be right than decisions made by the few. (Landmore, 2012, *Democratic Reason, Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of Many*)

In interviews I conducted with municipalities on creating cultures of engagement, a significant number shared that increased community satisfaction with improved processes or methods was a lever for change within the organization. Communities reported higher levels of satisfaction and organizations received fewer complaints when engagement was done authentically.

STRATEGY 4: SET CLEAR MEASUREMENT GOALS

Build rigor around your engagement processes so that you can stand behind the data and advocate for the community's perspectives. Take time to understand what a representative sample of the community would look like. What are the minimum requirements? This will vary depending on what your engagement goals are. For example, we need to speak to 20% of youth, or we need hear from at least five people from these four specific populations, or we need one community leader from each neighbourhood to attend all three sessions. The actual number of people engaged is not relevant by itself; it needs to be tied to representation and to the goals.

Determining these targets in advance will encourage you to adapt your plan to engage further or differently if you have not yet met your targets. In some cases, it might be useful to bring in someone with evaluation experience to make sure that the representation being sought fits participatory evaluation criteria. This helps give credibility when explaining the process of engagement that you have gone through.

If you struggle to get the participation you are seeking or it seems like the community is apathetic, consider tracking awareness as an engagement goal. For example, if you have an informational video and article that links to a survey to consult with the community on options, track both views of the video and article, as well as survey responses. This will help paint a picture about the number of people who are informed but don't have strong enough opinions to go on to complete a survey.

SCENARIO | NOT ENGAGING AS DEEPLY AS YOU KNOW YOU SHOULD

You're wanting to engage on a topic that you know affects a good portion of the community. You know people are interested and that they have specific ideas and opinions. But you're worried that if you open it up to involving the community in generating ideas, the community will want something you can't deliver. You're inclined to proceed with the project and bring the community in once you have some options for them to respond to. You only have a 3-month engagement window and you're fearful that the community will derail the process.

STRATEGY 1: CREATE THE CONTAINER

The container is your biggest safety net. It's the parameters you set whenever you are engaging a community. And it's critical that you are honest in setting these expectations.

Explicitly describing the container is one of the most respectful things you need to do. Communities are disrespected when you ask for their thoughts when you know that the plan is already set and can't be changed, or when you ask them to dream big when you only have the budget for a small project.

The container can include:

- Key criteria – the things the solution must address
- Constraints – the things that can't change

- Process – where you are at in the process, for example, working to understand the problem, identifying possible solutions, selecting a solution from a shortlist, etc.
- Budget – sharing your total dollar amount or scope for this project

Your container will be larger—more potential options will fit in it—the earlier you are in a deep engagement process, and then get smaller and more specific as the process continues.

Once you have defined the container, the question for your team then is: Can we be comfortable with any solution as long as it fits in the container?

This is often a confronting question. It causes us to pause and wrestle with our desire for control. Creating a clear container makes it easier for the answer to be, yes. It also means that we need to be comfortable in giving up control of what exactly the solution will be.

If your organization is currently very fearful of engaging, begin by setting specific criteria and a smaller container. As you get more comfortable with releasing control, your container will naturally grow.

STRATEGY 2: UNDERSTAND YOUR DESIRE FOR CONTROL

Most times, we are holding tightly to something—our ideas, our ego, our pride, our desire to help someone else by having the answers—and we are worried that this will be taken away. It is this loss of agency and control that often leads to fear. (Schulman, 2019, Power Literacy)

From an organizational standpoint, giving up control is hard when we think we (the planners/engineers, scientists, etc.) know best. We often have our “Expert Hats” on and view other opinions as sub-par to our own. Ask—really ask—who are the experts in this situation? Most people place significant value on the subject-matter knowledge of content experts. There is, however, another form of expertise that is equally essential when working in community: the knowledge of the “context expert” – the resident who has first-hand experience of the issue within our community. (Attygalle, 2017, The Context Experts)

Your goal as an engagement practitioner is to learn what is the best solution for the community. Because communities are unique and dynamic, the wisdom of the context expert is essential in designing effective, place-based solutions.

My colleague Sylvia Cheuy explains that, “The path to authentic community engagement begins when organizations demonstrate a willingness to move beyond their own goals and ambitions to recognize and champion the individual and shared goals and ambitions of the community”. (Cheuy, Trust: An Essential Ingredient in Authentic Community Engagement, 2018)

We also need to understand what the costs are of not sharing the control. To be effective, we likely need the whole system to move, or at minimum for the community to understand and buy-in. (Hardy, 2018, Co-Design in Collaboration) Consider these potential costs:

- The implementation of policies or projects which do not meet community need as they are based on incomplete information
- Managing a community outraged at poor engagement or decisions

- Increased time in obtaining project approvals and negotiated agreements
- Having to implement supplementary processes to obtain information not generated by initial poor practice
- A distrust amongst the community for poor or no engagement process which will, in turn, affect the level of community support for the overall project or organization

I find the question, ‘What don’t we know?’ to be a helpful way to open the conversation to inviting others in and sharing control.

STRATEGY 3: CREATE ADAPTIVE PROCESSES

Reassure yourself that you will never design an engagement process that is perfect. Instead, build in check points that allow you to stop, look back, and understand what you need to do next. Add checkpoint meetings with your core team after each milestone to ask:

- Are we reaching our intended community groups?
- What feedback have we received that we didn’t anticipate?
- Is there anything we need to do differently?

I like to use a [journey mapping](#) process to indicate where these checkpoints should be, and use the concept of [Start, Stop, Continue](#)—what are we doing and not doing to achieve our goal—to identify how the engagement should shift.

Plan on adapting the plan. It doesn’t mean it was a bad plan, it just means you’re listening and responding to the community. If community members feel heard, they are more likely to work with you and less likely to act in a way that derails the process.

STRATEGY 4: ENSURE THE LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT MATCHES THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Use the frame of simple, complicated, and complex problems as a gut check on how deeply you need to engage the community.

Simple problems are those where you can apply a proven step-by-step solution and have a high chance of success.

Complicated problems are those where the desired outcome is known and they are solvable if we bring together the right expertise—both content and context expertise—who can work together to reach a solution.

Complex problems are those where there is uncertainty of the desired outcome, the context is unique and dynamic, and we find solutions through the interaction of multiple parts, and through ongoing learning and adaptation. (Westley, Zimmerman, & Quinn Patton, 2006, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*)

To learn more about simple, complicated and complex problems, read [A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making](#).

I believe that we need to treat complex issues as such when engaging with the community. The stance of a complex problem is, ‘We don’t know the answer, but we need to invest in working together, learning together, trying new things, and focusing on incremental change’. The process is emergent. We need to put aside ego. No one knows the answers. So our role as engagement practitioners is to create the conditions for content and context experts to learn together to generate solutions.

If you are working on a complex issue, merely consulting is not good enough. If you are working on a polarizing issue, you must involve those diverse perspectives. Stop to ask yourself: what kind of problem are we trying to solve, and be honest with what kind of process is required to solve it.

See below for broad criteria for each level of the community engagement continuum.

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
GOAL	To provide balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions.	To obtain stakeholder feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with stakeholders throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood.	To partner with stakeholders in each aspect of the decision from development to solution.	Shared leadership of community-led projects with final decision-making at the community level.
STYLE	“Here’s what’s happening.”	“Here are some options, what do you think?”	“Here’s a problem, what ideas do you have?”	“Let’s work together to solve this problem.”	“You care about this issue, how can we support you?”
CRITERIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s a simple problem • Doesn’t negatively impact the community OR A decision has already been made and can’t be changed • No community influence on the project, process or outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s a simple or complicated problem • Hearing from the context experts is important to land on the right solution • Some community influence on the project, process or outcome • The community is not polarized on this issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s a simple or complicated problem • The community brings valuable experience • Community ownership of ideas is important • The community may be polarized on this issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s a complicated or complex problem • There is significant widespread interest in addressing this issue • Shared leadership is important • Significant level of community influence on the project, process and outcomes. • The community may be polarized on this issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s a simple, complicated or complex problem • There is lots of grassroots momentum • High level of community influence on the project, process and outcomes. • The community is not polarized on this issue

Adapted from the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum with Style and Criteria additions by Tamarack Institute

SCENARIO | YOU TRY TO KEEP POLARIZED GROUPS APART. YOU'RE BRACING YOURSELF FOR A LOT OF LOUD PEOPLE AND NO ALIGNMENT.

You're engaging people around a contentious issue and you know there are at least three polarized opinions about what the solution should be. You're wondering if you should try to bring everyone together or if you should engage each group separately. There is one powerful member of the community with strongly held opinions. You're worried people are going to be loud, angry, and disrespectful to others. You feel like eventually a solution will be selected and no one will be happy.

STRATEGY 1: INVITE THE COMMUNITY TO HELP DESIGN THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

When people have opinions, they want to be heard. And if your engagement process does not include appropriate and timely opportunities for people to share their perspectives, and for them to feel they are heard, they tend to get louder and louder. One area people often get loud about is the engagement process itself. You might hear comments like, "I didn't get a chance to be involved before it was too late".

Sometimes we as practitioners need to do a better job at transparently communicating the process, making it easy for people to participate, and closing the loop by sharing engagement findings in a timely manner.

But sometimes the engagement design process isn't straightforward, and we may not know when or how the community wants to be involved: Is this something they want to be involved in or do they not care? Should we seek consensus or is a majority decision ok? Should we spend more money to ensure the whole community is informed through paid communication channels or are the standard channels ok?

Rather than speculating, invite some community members in to help design the engagement process. Ask when, where, and how they'd like to be engaged. They'll likely have some new and creative ideas too. It could be as simple as informally calling three community members. Inviting people to co-design the process builds relationships, and is another accountability check that can be especially helpful when engaging around contentious issues.

STRATEGY 2: CHANGE YOUR MINDSET FROM ENGAGING POLARIZED GROUPS TO ENGAGING DIVERSE INDIVIDUALS

There is something intimidating about the thought of a group versus an individual. Groups can seem loud, more opinionated, more aligned. And it's true: decisions can be heavily influenced by special interest groups who may not represent the majority but inevitably skew responses because the broader community doesn't join the conversation.

Matt Crozier, CEO of Bang the Table, cites this as a key reason for creating the online engagement platform Engagement HQ. In an episode of [The Private Side of Public Work podcast](#), Crozier shared:

“I always used to work in government jobs and have watched policy being heavily influenced by [special interest groups] that don’t represent the broad community. Over the years I have become passionate about giving the broader community a real voice in the process, because I think we actually get better decisions on policies when that happens.”

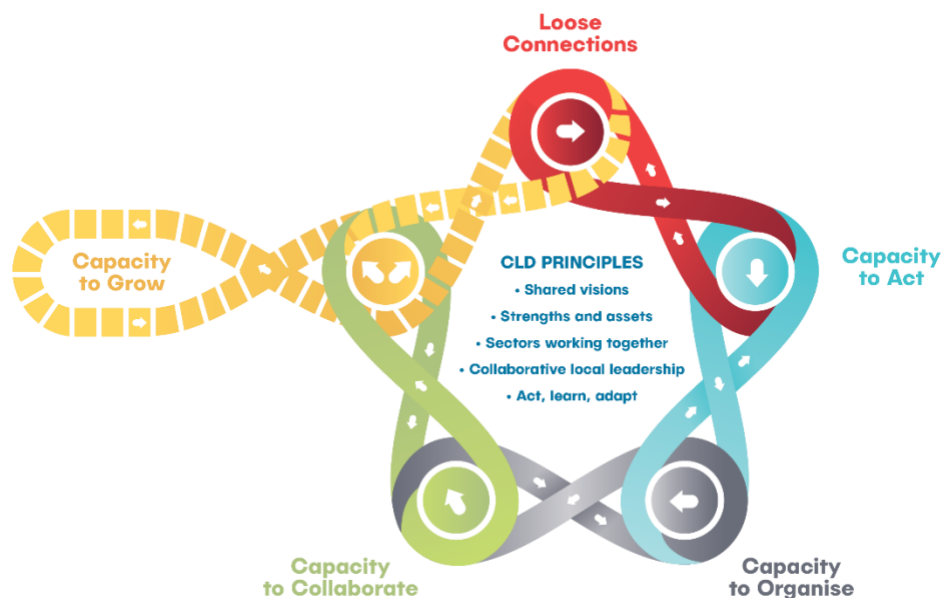
Giving too much weight to the group can be problematic. It polarizes opinion. Groups can seem stubborn and steadfast, unwavering in their opinions. Whereas people can express empathy. Instead of focusing on the group we need to focus on the individuals: the parent, child, homeowner, business owner, person seeking a paycheque; and look to their motives: to provide, to care, to understand, to teach, to earn. When we look at the individual and honour their motives, it can help the fear of the group subside.

STRATEGY 3: FIND A RELATIONSHIP BROKER

If there’s a group you’d like to engage that you find ‘hard to reach’ take time to figure out who has a relationship with someone in the group. Talk to that intermediary about why you’d like to connect, ask for their advice, and for their help in setting up and facilitating a connection.

Our partner, David Hanna, from Inspiring Communities in New Zealand shares his personal stories of connecting in with gang communities, and the relationship broker has played a key role in establishing an initial connection.

Step 1 is establishing a connection, step 2 is building relationship, step 3 is working together at least once (I call this out because we often think we need to establish long term relationships, however, working together just once builds the capacity of both parties to work together again).



Inspiring Communities – Community-Led Development Theory of Change

STRATEGY 4: CREATE SPACES FOR EMPATHY. ALLOW PEOPLE TO BE HEARD.

Hold tight to the sage advice from writer and changemaker Margaret Wheatley, who wrote, “Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.” (Wheatley, 2002, Turning To One Another) Take time to build relationships and learn about the other. Practicing empathy is a

critical step when bringing people to work together, especially when your work is designed to be long term. It may feel slow at first to take time for relationship building but doing this can shape the entire course of your work. Where there may have been polarized opinion, people will be more eager to listen and understand.

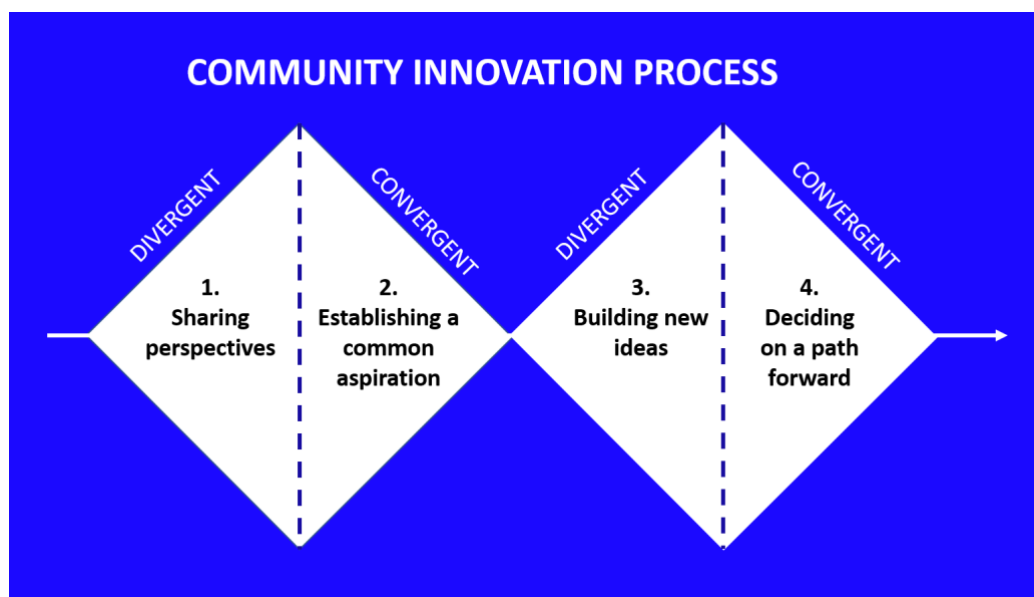
This age of digital communication often increases the amount of surface level conversations we have around the issues that impact us. It's through a comment, a reply, a like, or a thumbs down. And these are often made in haste without concern for the individual.

When possible, create space for people with diverse perspectives to come together in person. Consider building appreciative inquiry techniques into your agenda. Or invite someone from each perspective to share their story to the whole group. Prompt people that their job is to listen well.

Research on trust and wellbeing (Helliwell, 2016, New Evidence on Trust and Well-being) found that people who have something in common are more likely to trust each other, even if the thing they have in common is random—for example, you both like the colour blue, both have labradoodles, or both have children in grade 6. Imagine how much more productive our conversations could be if we cared for, or trusted the other a little bit more. As a practitioner, how can you facilitate connection?

STRATEGY 5: CREATE A SHARED ASPIRATION TOGETHER

A common thread in most of these examples of fear is an us vs. them mindset. The diagram below illustrates a productive way to navigate these engagement processes. We need to embrace diversity. Embrace different opinions. Go slow and take the time to share perspectives. Then ask, what kinds of things do we all care about? So often the diverse perspectives we encounter represent different solutions to a shared concern. For example,



Community Innovation Process illustrated by Tamarack Institute

increasing policing and hosting neighbourhood dinners are both potential solutions to issues around community safety.

When planning collaborative processes, we at Tamarack believe it's critical to share perspectives and align on a shared aspiration before brainstorming solutions. If we jump straight to solutions, the only option is for people to debate about which solution is best. If instead we first seek to understand diverse perspectives and then align on a shared aspiration, we can engage in constructive ideation or deliberation processes (rather than angry, loud or polarized ones).

One tool we love for establishing a shared aspiration is [Co-Defining Your Dilemma](#). This tool, developed by Max Hardy, considers the perspectives of various stakeholders to develop a meaningful question that encourages creativity and the generation of win-win solutions.

STRATEGY 6: CHANGE YOUR TOOLKIT FROM CONSULTATIVE TO GENERATIVE METHODS

In an episode of *Conversations that Matter*, Valerie Lemmie of the Kettering Foundation stated, "If you don't [involve diverse voices] then you won't have a solution, because too many people will come out in opposition. So if it really is a problem that people share, you want them at the table with you." (Lemmie, 2018, *Conversations That Matter: Is Democracy Under Attack?*)

Polarized opinions tend to surface when people have strong and different views of what they think the solution should be. The style of consultative methods is to say, "Here are some options, what do you think?" So if you're consulting around a contentious issue, you will likely have loud people preferring different options. If you select one option, you will have some people who are happy and many people who are upset.

Alternatively, the style of generative methods is to say, "We have this problem, what perspectives and ideas do you have?" Bringing together diverse people naturally increases the volume of different ideas. If we listen to those ideas, and then facilitate a respectful process for discernment, we are engaging well.

Generative methods are helpful when facing polarized perspectives for two main reasons:

You create a sense of ownership – When someone is a part of creating something they feel a sense of ownership, and they are then more likely to believe in, and agree with, the outcome. Ways to create ownership include:

- Ideation – Brainstorming, discussions, focus groups, hackathons, etc.;
- Involvement – Asking someone to host, facilitate or lead a session;
- Contribution – Information sharing how their participation made a difference;
- Referrals – Having someone bring a friend, recommend, refer, or publicly sharing their involvement.

The solution discernment process helps to navigate polarities – If you have polarized opinions your goal is to bring groups together to understand the others' perspective, and generative process offer a structure for this.

Generative engagement methods could include:

- Understanding community priorities
- Learning about community realities (eg. [data walks](#), story sharing)
- Identifying a shared aspiration together (eg. [Common agenda framework](#))
- [System mapping](#) and [journey mapping](#)
- Ideation where context experts come up with solutions (eg. brainstorming, co-design)
- Deliberative processes where content and context experts come together to reach consensus (eg. [citizens juries](#))
- Building the capacity of community members
- Building a diverse and representative leadership table

SCENARIO | AVOIDANCE

You know that the way you, or who you represent, has engaged the community in the past was not good [read: exclusive, inauthentic, took advantage of people, was unaccountable] and you are worried you'll be chastised for past mistakes. There's distrust towards your organization. So it's easier to continue not to engage.

STRATEGY 1: SEE MISTAKES AS INSIGHTS

Ignoring past mistakes is one way we disassociate ourselves from situations and create 'enemies' which "leads to increased turf, isolation, alienation and a blindness to the needs, challenges and aspirations of others". (Weaver, 2017, Turf, Trust, Collaboration & Collective Impact)

Take responsibility for past mistakes even if they were not personally yours. Be the person who decides it's worth trying to bridge the gap. Understand that progress moves at the speed of trust, but take the necessary steps to re-build trust.

Use the [Ouch, Oops Framework](#) to work together to understand unintended negative impacts.

To learn more about re-building trust, read Liz Weaver's paper: [Turf, Trust, and Collaboration.](#)

STRATEGY 2: PARTNER WITH ALLIES

Take a first step by reaching out to organizations or groups that do have a good relationship with the community you are avoiding. If you want to face your fears, doing so is much easier with someone you trust by your side.

The community that you are looking to develop a relationship with is likely skeptical, so a shared ally can be the bridge, and even a 'translator' to help clarify intent.

STRATEGY 3: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE YOU NEED TO ENGAGE

So often we seek to engage groups but haven't yet established a connection, interest, relevance, or trust. Consider the concept of pre-engagement—what work do you need to do before you can engage the community well?

The Vitalyst Health Foundation shares pre-engagement strategies which include:

- Doing the work to understand the history of the community, what community networks and structures already exist, and gaining an understanding of past and current engagement efforts.
- Gaining an understanding of a range of community member perspectives.
- Identifying strategies for engagement that support community preferences.

(Vitalyst Health Foundation, 2019, Pre-Community Engagement)

To learn more about pre-engagement, read the Vitalyst Health Foundation's [Spark Report on Pre-Engagement](#).

SCENARIO | OVERPREPARING FOR FEAR OF BEING THE SPOKESPERSON

It's the day before the engagement and you're frantically trying to read up on all reports that have been issued on the topic. You're worried people will ask you questions that you don't have answers to. You feel you're always on the back foot, reacting to people.

STRATEGY 1: UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE AS FACILITATOR

As a community engagement practitioner, your role is to be a facilitator. What can you do to pull out the best ideas from the community? How can you ensure people have the chance to share and others have the chance to listen and learn? How can you connect people and ideas?

It is not your job to have answers. Hopefully this is a freeing thought. But what will you do when people ask challenging questions that you don't have answers to? See the next point.

STRATEGY 2: BRING A CONTENT EXPERT

There is huge value in bringing content and context expertise together. Community members are often hungry for information—What strategies are most successful? What have other communities done? What are the known barriers?

Coach the content expert/s in how they deliver information. The content expert needs to be curious and interested in the community's perspective. A good rule of thumb is to share the known information and then continue immediately with the unknowns. Re-emphasize what information you need from the community. For example:

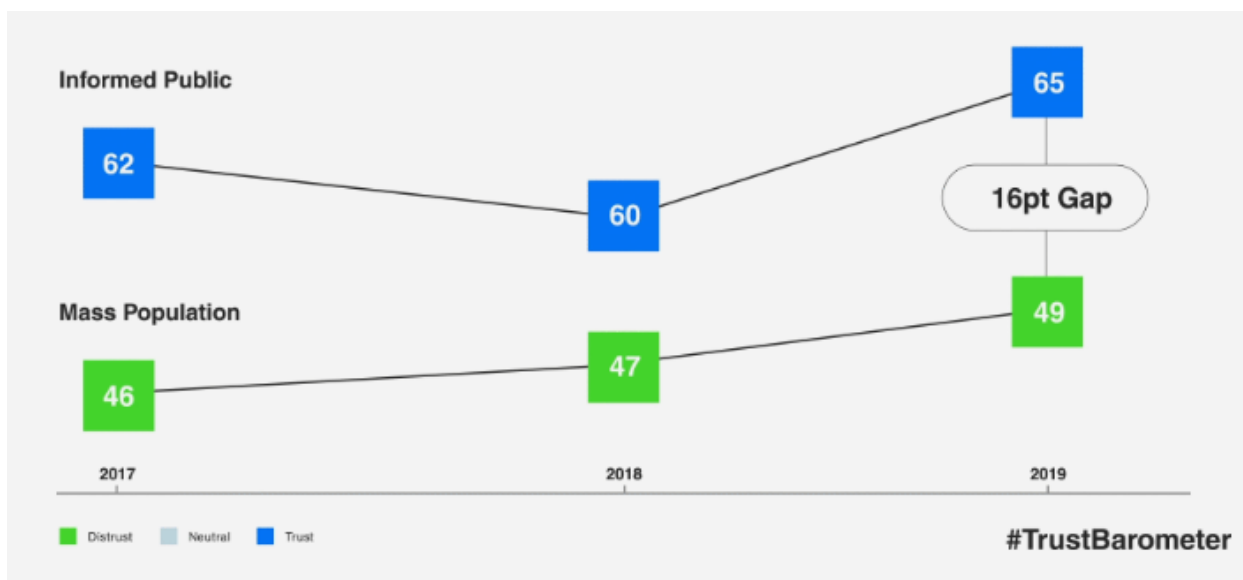
- We need a solution that meets X, Y, and Z criteria and based on that we've identified these two options. What we now need to know from the community is...etc.

- Here are three strategies that have worked in other communities and we’re wanting to know which ones are most appealing in this community.
- We know solution X increases health outcomes but we haven’t seen as much uptake as we’d like. What are the barriers for you?

STRATEGY 3: SHARE EVERYTHING

When we keep the community at an arms distance, when we withhold information, this is when dissent festers. This is when people come fervently seeking answers.

Research shows that the more informed the community is, the more likely they are to trust. (Edelman, 2019, 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer) We often hold information back, worried it is too complex for a ‘regular’ person to understand. But most of the time people are already aware of the complexities. Often they’re the ones struggling, and they know there is no silver bullet solution. Sharing how difficult the situation is can actually be helpful in addressing why there is no ‘perfect’ solution and it helps people to accept progress over perfection.



2019 Edelman Trust Barometer

Too often we consider the community to be something we need to manage rather than viewing the community as an ally. The paradox is that the more involved the community is, the less you’ll need to ‘manage’.

BOLDNESS IS ESSENTIAL

Best-in-class community engagement seeks to move deeper in the engagement continuum to a place where there is comfort with the concept of the community being the decision-maker. It is deeply collaborating with people with diverse perspectives and experiences, brainstorming openly and creating together. It is trusting that regular people can understand complex situations. It is experimenting with new technology and techniques and striving to communicate in a way that connects. It is saying, “I don’t know”, and asking the community to share and offer their insights. It is being humble and asking for the community’s expertise. It is withholding judgement and deliberating together. It is investing in relationships for longer than a single project. It is investing in people; to build skills and to choose transformational experiences over transactional ones.

It is easy to see why fear might be a barrier to this vision.

The culture of engagement within our organizations is created by both the written and unwritten rules, which form a common understanding for how we should behave. When we each work—individually and within our organizations—to address fear we are making steps to change the culture of engagement.

Community engagement practitioners require a unique skillset. They need to be strong facilitators and communicators, who are creative, humble, respectful, inquisitive, and organized. When engagement is done well, we see outcomes like whole communities rallying together around a shared issue. We see people with lived experience who have previously been excluded being given leadership roles and the power to affect change. We see less polarization and more unification despite diverse perspectives. We see people who were previously protective of their resources now sharing and understanding that everyone is better off if they work together.

It’s a beautiful vision. It’s possible. But boldness is essential.

ABOUT LISA ATTYGALLE

In her role at Tamarack, Lisa works with cities and organizations to help them meaningfully engage their communities. Over the last six years her work has focused on creating authentic engagement strategies and training staff teams, teaching and writing about innovative engagement methodologies, designing and facilitating workshops with a focus on raising the voice of the context expert, integrated communications planning, and the use of technology and creativity for engagement. Lisa advocates for simplicity in infrastructure, frameworks and design and loves applying the principles of marketing, advertising, loyalty, and user experience to community initiatives.



Lisa comes to this work from the private sector where she worked at one of Canada's leading communications firms with clients in agribusiness, healthcare, financial services and technology. Lisa brings private sector knowledge to public sector work. Hailing from Australia, Lisa also worked on major water infrastructure projects as the liaison between municipal government, engineering and the community.

Lisa's other titles include Artist, Wife and Mum. On the side, Lisa is one of ten owners of Seven Shores Community Café in Waterloo, ON. She is also a Trustee of the KW Awesome Foundation - a group that provides no-strings attached grants for "awesome" community-based projects.

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