

Center for Civic Innovation
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Communities and regions are complex systems containing a wide range of influences coming from many different decisions and activities. Rarely does a single leader, decision-maker, agency or organization control or, acting on their own, achieve community outcomes. More often, an accumulation of decisions across various groups, organizations and individuals affects the direction of community or regional change.

This holds true not only for broader sustainable community development or comprehensive community change initiatives, but also for efforts to address specific community issues. For example, many of our most challenging environmental problems are less the result of easily identifiable causes than the cumulative impact of many decisions made by individual property owners, consumers, commuters and community residents.

These types of issues continue to confound traditional planning and management approaches. Instead, progress toward more desirable futures requires not only *greater understanding* of the issue among a wider range of community members, but also an *enhanced sense of responsibility* for helping design proposed solutions and *shared accountability* for making progress toward desired outcomes. Effective collaborative governance systems:

- Recognize and seek to engage the positive contributions of a broader set of community actors in the long-term vitality of a community;
- More fully inform and are informed by a wide variety of community members; and
- Build the civic capacities of all these constituencies to collaboratively act, learn, and adapt their decisions and actions over time.

Through its own activities and in partnership with other organizations, GMI's Center for Civic Innovation seeks to foster the development of the following four foundations of an effective collaborative governance system:

1. Broadening the understanding and ownership of an issue and its solutions among community members (individual and organizational);

Once we admit that none of us individually have all the answers, and that all of our decisions can affect the future of our community, then it becomes more apparent that “[e]verybody has a role in the learning and wisdom generating process.”^{vi} Vital, resilient communities create and sustain processes which engage a broad and diverse range of community members, recognizing that every member is both a source of knowledge as well as a potential decision maker who will affect the

community's future. "They seek new information and different ideas to add to the local mix of experience and wisdom" and "recognize everyone for their contribution."ⁱⁱ

In addition to broadening the base of knowledge and experience in constructing potential solutions, the use of dialogue-based processes that engage the broadest range of community members have been effective at moving community members beyond their particular perception of the issue and its solution and towards collectively articulated core community values, principles, and desired outcomes. And when this is done through a process that engages rather than excludes, it moves the ownership of the problem and its solution from "them" to "us".

2. Fostering a culture of inquiry and the creation of systems for performance measurement, community learning and adaptation.

When we admit that our communities are very complex systems and that none of us really *know* the most effective way for achieving our collective well-being, we open ourselves to a new approach to planning and action. Plans, strategies and actions are seen as opportunities not only to make progress toward our goals, but also to learn, adjust and improve future choices and actions. We focus on community outcomes and develop measurement systems that we use either formally or informally to judge the desirability and effectiveness of our actions. "Such a system is capable . . . of improving itself in ways we could not predict, but which are more effective than what the most sophisticated analysts could create. Such self-improvement and adaptation however requires feedback – various kinds of information – to flow among the players who make the city what it is."^[i]

As with organizations, successful communities do more than simply establish indicators, data warehouses, and performance monitoring and evaluation systems; they create a "culture of inquiry" that encourages self-evaluation and sharing lessons – both positive and negative – among all community members. This learning, adjustment, and improvement occurs as people take action, collectively reflect upon how those actions impact desired outcomes, discuss and modify their understanding of how the system works, and then identify modifications to future actions that are more likely to create the positive impacts they are seeking to achieve. Learning and reflection occurs throughout the community – and not just as a "special planning project" or as the responsibility of one agency. "Good or bad, learning communities share the results of projects, actions, and events."ⁱⁱⁱ

3. Building networks, capacities and institutions for collaborative action across individuals and sectors; and

An essential component of a resilient community is "the capacity of individuals to come together and share their knowledge and skills to solve local problems. Partnerships and collaboration in communities mean a wider range of skills are acquired by people, and this enhances community capacity to manage change."^{iv} If people and groups are unable to bridge their diverse perspectives and experiences, then it becomes more difficult to imagine how the communication and joint action necessary for community improvement will occur.

There is much evidence that the presence and strength of networks within communities is a key ingredient for effective, vital communities.[i] Networks – among group/organizational members, between different groups, and between public and private institutions – facilitate the flow of information, resources and the formation of a sense of connectedness, trust and ethic of reciprocity among community members that enables more effective collaborative action. In addition, they enhance access to the wide range of internal resources available to a community through its various community members, local government and private organizations, as well as the resources (knowledge, \$'s, etc.) available from other surrounding communities.

In addition to a rich set of networks, the presence of “convening organizations” – institutions who function (and are widely perceived) as both neutral and credible facilitators of cross-sector deliberation within a community – can play a critical role in creating the necessary space for groups to collectively learn about and from each other, and to co-create an explicit vision, shared story, or set of desired outcomes for their future that continues to be referred to and enriched by members as they act.

Recognizing that sustained community change results from the combined behaviors, actions, practices and policies of all the individuals and groups in and serving a community – the notion of where leadership is centered must be expanded. Leadership is distributed, even if unequally, wherever choices are made: in the kitchen, schoolyard, senior center, place of worship, etc., as well as halls of government and agency board rooms. Tapping the power of shared aspiration, positive choice and caring in every corner of the community is a prerequisite to a healthy community and a healthy democracy.

4. Facilitating formal and informal opportunities for enhancing understanding of the key system drivers and leverage points for change.

All problems are embedded within some larger system. Often, however, that system is often not explicitly considered or defined and participants in any particular system may not be fully aware of the range of relationships and forces affecting how and why a system behaves in certain ways. Systems thinking, the integrating discipline for a learning organization, is also fundamental to community change practices. As noted by Peter Senge, “vision without systems thinking ends up painting lovely pictures of the future with no deep understanding of the forces that must be mastered to move from here to there.” Without systems thinking informing our selection of plausible future scenarios, desired outcomes and strategies, “the first condition for nurturing the vision is not met: a genuine belief that we can make our vision real in the future.” [i] Any process or tool seeking to create fundamental and enduring improvements in environmental integrity and community sustainability are more likely to be used if they effectively identify the most critical causal forces and key leverage points for change in these larger systems, providing information to potential users that will actually make a difference in decisions and subsequent results.

“Thinking is the place where intelligent actions begin.”^v Yet, both individually and as a society, we are speeding up our processes and giving ourselves less not more time to think and reflect. Learning – individual, group and community – requires that spaces for reflection exist and that institutions and community members reclaim the necessary time to talk, reflect and share their experiences. “Discussion, dialogue, conflict, and reflection are part of the learning process.”^{vi} Yet we must create

and allow the necessary time and space for each one of these processes if they are to be positive community-building experiences that facilitate collaborative learning and improved performance toward community goals.

“If we feel we're changing in ways we don't like, or seeing things in the world that make us feel sorrowful, then we need time to think about this. We need time to think about what we might do and where we might start to change things. We need time to develop clarity and courage. If we want our world to be different, our first act needs to be reclaiming time to think. Nothing will change for the better until we do that.”^{vii}

ⁱ Allen B. Moore and Rusty Brooks, “Learning Communities and Community Development,” *Learning Communities: International Journal of Adult and Vocational Learning*, v. 1 (2000), p. 11

ⁱⁱ Moore and Brooks, p. 11

ⁱⁱⁱ Moore and Brooks, p. 12

^{iv} Sue Kilpatrick, “Community Learning and Sustainability: Practice and Policy,” CRLRA Discussion Paper D6/2000 (2000), p. 4

^v Margaret Wheatley, “Can We Reclaim Time to Think?” *Shambhala Sun* (September 2001). Accessed at <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/timetothink.html>

^{vi} Moore and Brooks, p. 11

^{vii} Margaret Wheatley, “Can We Reclaim Time to Think?” *Shambhala Sun* (September 2001). Accessed at <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/timetothink.html>