

Introduction: A New Era in Community Building

A new kind of social dialogue is emerging in communities across Canada, the United States, and other countries around the world. These conversations — I call them community conversations — are being generated by two conflicting realities: the growing complexity of our societies' needs and the elementary nature of the tools available to fix them.

The issues facing communities and those at risk — the unemployed, disabled persons, single parents, and senior citizens, to name a few — are complex. Yet the system that serves those in need yields simple, even simplistic, solutions. Services such as counseling, income support, and housing are calibrated to solve single issues. They are sorely lacking in the face of personal and community problems that are multifaceted, adaptive, and interconnected.

Individuals who suddenly find themselves without a job, for example, face a bewildering array of single-issue services to call on.

One organization provides job-search counseling, another job training, while the income-support agency and social security office are at opposite ends of town. All too often even basic necessities, such as food and clothing, are provided by separate agencies. The people at risk, however, often face a multitude of personal and social issues, such as their community's economic status and safety and its attitudes toward racism. Is it any wonder that they are frustrated with a community system that, for example, offers band-aid solutions like food vouchers, instead of diagnosing and treating the root causes of social ills, such as a lack of sustainable employment?

But things are changing. Our inability to address these challenges head-on has led some communities to enter into unprecedented conversations about how the community system needs to change. These conversations are beginning to focus on finding a better way forward. Funding cuts or changing government priorities may have prompted this search, but change has also been sparked by community leaders who are seeking more comprehensive effective solutions.

I have written *Community Conversations* for those who are responsible to form up and lead these conversations and those who have committed themselves to participate in them. I hope to help make community conversations as easy, enjoyable, and effective as possible.

Appropriately enough, I have chosen to write this book conversationally. As you will see, I love telling stories. In fact, recalling some of the best conversations I have been involved in has sustained me on this writing journey.

What to Expect from This Book

Community Conversations is composed of two parts. Part I is theoretical, but gently so. Using anecdotes and concrete examples, it explores the four building blocks of community conversations: conversing, engaging, collaborating, and casting a vision. Part II gets down to specifics, with ten stories of great community conversations that I have been part of. These stories will give you proven techniques for holding deliberate and strategic conversations where you live.

Most of the chapters are relatively short. They may be read in sequence or as your interest leads you. My hope is that the stories I share will inspire you and help you see the many ways to be creative in solving social issues.

An appendix provides a list of resources worth exploring for further information. To make these more convenient for you to access, we have placed this section as well on the Tamarack Dialogue webpage at http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3_dialogue.html. We will continually update the content on that site to reflect new or revised links, resources, and learnings.



One piece of context setting is needed before we begin our journey together. It has to do with the new social movement called Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs), a movement that is leading the drive toward better, more comprehensive solutions to the complex issues of our communities today. CCIs work across sectoral boundaries because the people involved recognize that issues such as racism and poverty can be addressed only if problems and solutions are

aligned. CCIs, according to Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community Change (1997),

seek improved outcomes for individuals and families, as well as improvements in neighborhood conditions by working comprehensively across social, economic and physical sectors. CCIs operate on the principle that community building — that is, strengthening institutional capacity at the community level, enhancing social capital and personal networks, and developing leadership — is a necessary aspect of the process of transforming issues facing a community.

When a community begins to think and work comprehensively, it naturally attempts to use all of its assets. Assets can take different forms and come from surprising places. Schools, businesses, government departments, museums, community centres, and parks and other public spaces can provide resources, ideas, and support. But most often it is not the organizations but the people who lead them that represent the true, untapped asset. For instance, the clients served by an initiative bring unique and passionate ideas; the director and volunteers of organizations bring valuable perspectives and a web of relationships; and the business community or people at different levels of government bring new ideas, talents, and financial resources to the issue.

What I am attempting to contribute through this book is the insight that effective community conversations are the *means* by which CCIs are more likely to be successful. Through this type of conversation,

we bring together the ideas, skills, passions, and hopes of all sectors of the community. And we forge a better path forward, creating a network of people committed to advancing the idea.

These conversations usually begin with a small group of people. As this group deepens their understanding of and commitment to their goals, they reach out to engage their broader community, building a larger, multi-sector network. This network spends significant time in conversation, learning about the issues they hope to solve and building trust and a common language across sectors. Most often, but not always, a vision emerges that all of these sectors resonate with, a formal leadership roundtable is formed, and a community plan is written.

At this stage, a community conversation takes on two purposes. The first is to create a space in which those involved can get to know, understand, and trust one another. Trust is important because it allows people to open up to new ideas and suspend what they know to be true. The second purpose is to create a space to learn together. In some ways, the space we create together is like a ship for exploring new seas. A key outcome of conversation is the ability of a diverse group of people to come to a common understanding.

The role of these conversations is to bring together the people in a community who can contribute to the success of the initiative being promoted. By working together, people can change the way a community addresses a particular issue, improving the quality of life on many levels. Like the tide that lifts all boats, community conversations enable real and lasting community change.

